# Table of Contents


1. basis | introduction
2. playlist
3. allegiances OBJ
4. prologue
5. chapter 1
6. chapter 2
7. chapter 3
8. chapter 4
9. chapter 5
10. chapter 6
11. chapter 7
12. chapter 8
13. chapter 9
14. chapter 10
15. chapter 11
16. chapter 12
17. chapter 13
18. chapter 14
19. chapter 15

# basis | introduction

**TRIGGER WARNING**

blood & violent depictions, mental illness, themes of classism, physical and mental abuse, minor hints of suicidal tendencies

。˚ •□ɘ♡e□•˚ 。

"in war, whichever side may call itself the victor, there are no winners, but all are losers."
— neville chamberlain

**A/N**

hello guys! for those who know me, welcome back. and those who don't, you can call me lex!

insult to injury has been a project i've been planning for nearly two years and began writing four months ago because i was so excited, and as i am typing this, it is already halfway through so expect frequent chapter updates!

i was inspired by a lot of reasons to write this warriors fanfiction, the main reason being the state of the world and the corruption of power around us. conversations come up about absolute power, how it destructs, and the tragedies of war. within this story, a sense of found family and hope is the silver lining.

while mind over matter, if you read it, was significantly short, insult to injury is around the length of grim hollow. so instead of focusing on developing one character, they'll all have their story to tell. these characters aren't perfect, and they may make you mad at some points, but growth will follow and that was one of my favorite parts when writing this.

and while we follow *mainly* through the pov of ravendusk, sometimes i'll be switching that up to give insight on the other characters and help move along the plot! i tried to add little

nuances to every character, even ones who appear for a few chapters or have few lines of dialogue.

so far, the reason i've had so much fun with this fic is because the characters continue taking over and changing the narrative from the original story. many plot bunnies. but i find my best writing to be when that happens!

i've never been so invested in a story and characters of my own like this and i cannot wait to share it with you all. thank you for reading!

# playlist

⸰ ⸰ ⸰

**SOUNDTRACK**

**i.** *hymn,* joel porter // **ii.** *on the turning away,* pink floyd // **iii.** *a pearl,* mitski // **iv.** *seven,* taylor swift // **v.** *wires,* the neighborhood // **vi.** *when i'm gone,* 3 doors down // **vii.** *the dogs of war,* pink floyd // **viii.** *fight or flight,* conan gray // **ix.** *line without a hook,* ricky montgomery // **x.** *the great war,* taylor swift // **xi.** *i know the end,* phoebe bridgers // **xii.** *fourth of july,* sufjan stevens // **xiv.** *grace,* rag'n'bone man // **xv.** *high hopes,* pink floyd // **xvi.** *re-do,* modern baseball // **xvii.** *borderline,* tame impala // **xviii.** *as the world caves in,* matt maltese // **xix.** *wicked game,* chris isaac // **xx.** *exit music (for a film),* radiohead

⸰ ⸰ ⸰

# allegiances OBJ

**SummerClan**

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

*LEADER*
**Fallowstar**
white tomcat with gray markings and blue eyes.

*DEPUTY*
**Fireflare**
orange and white tomcat with deep green eyes.

*MEDICINE CATS*
**Silentfeather**
light gray tabby she-cat with green eyes.
**Darkstream**
black she-cat with a white mask and green eyes.

*WARRIORS*
**Ravendusk**
black tomcat with white paws, chest and underbelly. he has green eyes.
**Fawnfreckle** ⊰ *apprentice, Cloudpaw*
light brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.
**Irisfrost**
darker brown tabby tomcat with yellow eyes.
**Frostfall**
white she-cat with light blue eyes.
**Mauvebee**
black and white she-cat with green eyes.
**Bumblebear**
brown tabby tomcat with yellow eyes.
**Pearlpool** ⊰ *apprentice, Frozenpaw*
light gray she-cat with amber eyes.
**Sorrelfeather**
russet tomcat with green eyes.

**Rimesong**
black-and-white she-cat with blue eyes.
**Whiteraven** ⊰ *apprentice, Foxpaw*
white tomcat with black paws and green eyes.
**Paleflower**
light ginger tomcat with green eyes.

*APPRENTICES*
**Cloudpaw**
fluffy white tomcat with blue eyes.
**Frozenpaw**
blind, light ginger she-cat with a white belly, chest and chin. she has glazed eyes.
**Foxpaw**
russet tomcat with green eyes.

*QUEEN*
**Floodgaze**
gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes. mother to lightkit and rillkit.

*KITS*
**Lightkit**
light brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.
**Rillkit**
gray tabby tom with blue eyes.

*ELDERS*
**Sunflicker**
tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes.
**Brackenburr**
brown tabby with yellow eyes.

**Central Point**

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

*RULER*
**Ares**
black and white tomcat with blue eyes.

*HEIR*

**Sybil**
muscled white she-cat with sharp blue eyes.

*HEAD COMBATANTS*
**Zephyr**
brindled black and white tomcat with green eyes.
**Foxglove**
dilute gray tomcat with dark green eyes.

*COMBATANTS*
**Cove**
calico she-cat with green eyes.
**Circe**
dark brown she-cat with green eyes.
**Glade**
black tomcat with a white patch on his chest, paws and tail tip. he has green eyes.
**Crow**
fully sable tomcat with green eyes.
**Poison**
smoky black tomcat with near gray undertones and yellow eyes.
**Amaryllis**
gray spotted tabby she-cat with green eyes.
**Cressida**
lynx-point siamese she-cat with blue eyes. she has a scar running from her chest all the way down to her stomach.

*TRAINEES*
**Holo**
brown she-cat with green eyes and a white chest and front legs.
**Seed**
lilac mackerel tabby tomcat with amber eyes.

*MAIDS*
**Rhea**
marbled gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.
**Freya**
golden bengal she-cat with amber eyes.

*MEDICS*
**Lily**

white and gray brindled she-cat with green eyes.

**Sage**

lithe gray she-cat with green eyes.

*PRISONER*

**Hyacinth**

tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes.

# prologue

Ravendusk had the perfect life if he was going by face value definition. The seemingly perfect mate, loyal friends, supportive parents and a strong community to ground him. He was raised into a strong support system, never feeling an ounce of loneliness his entire life.

That fact made everything worse. He had no reason, no right, to be so screwed up. Days blended together, time was passing painfully slow and yet fast when he had the chance to look back.

Moons ago, a brutal war had rocked all four of the clans to their core. He didn't understand it then, and he certainly didn't understand it now. It all fell behind clan politics, a power struggle between two near-dictator like leaders that didn't involve Fallowstar or SummerClan.

And yet his impressionable leader fell into the lies fed to him, and Ravendusk found himself involved in a war he had no business being in. It didn't really bother him then, his felt he needed something to prove.

At the time of the war, his only issue was his family, and every time he remembered his blatant disdain, he'd recoil at his pathetic past self-conceit. He was so caught up in his image. His own life. Falling into a relationship and prioritizing her over everyone because she lacked the security he had, and in the process drawing him away from everyone else.

Ever since he was just a kitten, his mother had always told him to look after his sister. It peeved him off to no ends.

*"She's your kit, not mine. Your responsibility, not mine. I am not her parent. You are."*

Those words were burned in his brain. Deep down, he knew he still held truth in them. She was his sister, not his kit, but that didn't

mean he couldn't have tried harder to prevent what happened. He didn't even try at all.

His sister, Aloepetal, had always been a lover instead of a fighter. She did what she needed to do in order to become a warrior, but she never cared to go past that. While her life still had vitality, Ravendusk used to despise her for that.

*If she gets herself killed, she did it to herself.*

That was always his thought.

It was merciless how it all went down. Tag-teamed clan against tag-teamed clan. The rain was brutal. The yowls were full of terror and savagery. The smell of blood was suffocating.

He remembered it vividly, seeing her body splayed out in the mud, her lifeless eyes staring tauntingly into his own.

Moons passed and he was never the same. Each day was routine. Wake up, eat, sleep. Things he used to find enjoyment in felt hollow now. Since that nightmarish day, his mate, Frostfall, was glued to his side. She took care of him because he couldn't. It started out fine, he supposed. But soon words of encouragement bled away into something much more belittling. He knew he deserved it. She wanted the cat she fell in love with back. He wanted him back, too.

*"No one is an exception to loss, Ravendusk. You're being dramatic."*

Frostfall's words made sense in his head, but he couldn't help it. He wanted to, more than anyone knew, but it was as if the qualities that made him who he was had vanished without a trace.

It reached a point where the deputy didn't bother to assign him to patrols anymore. It wasn't like he even attended them to begin with, so Ravendusk saw that one coming. His mother never blamed him for his sister's death. He wanted her to. It was her who had burdened him with that responsibility, but she was always on his side. He didn't know why.

What stung most of all was seeing everyone around him carry on like nothing happened. *My sister is dead!* He wanted to scream it to

everyone who continued to relish in life. But he knew that wasn't fair. This was his grief, and they could pity him, but they had their own lives and they weren't nearly as damaged as his own.

The world moves on whether you want it to or not, that's just the reality of it.

*"Others have it worse. You still have me. You still have Fawnfreckle and Irisfrost. You still have your parents. Stop waiting for the world to give you purpose, because it won't. You have to do that on your own."*

It was every day he'd hear it from his jaded mate, but he didn't believe her. No one could have it worse than he did now. No one could feel as empty as he did now.

What a selfish thought.

# chapter 1

The sun was too hot. The blended conversations of his clanmates was overstimulating. The light was blaring, blinding him as he made his way towards the fresh-kill pile, forcing himself with every bit of energy he had left. His fur was matted, his ribs poking out from his sable pelt. He learned to ignore the wandering eyes of his clanmates.

"Rave!" A cheery voice beamed, one he knew very well. Ravendusk flicked an ear in acknowledgment as he turned slowly to meet the voice who had called out to him.

It was Irisfrost, accompanied by his sister Fawnfreckle, two of his longtime friends. The tabby pair embraced him with warmth and he watched as Fawnfreckle dropped a fresh rabbit by his paws, a complacent glint shining in her eyes.

"Caught it just for you, you're welcome." She spoke, the typical rasp her voice adorned no stranger today.

"She's lying. Cloudpaw caught it." Irisfrost corrected, rolling his eyes as he swatted his sister with his tail. "You'd think she'd be proud her apprentice was advancing."

"The little twit just got lucky." She retorted, but she remained lighthearted. Ravendusk used to laugh at her antics, but he didn't have it in him anymore so he just stared at them both with a blank expression, nearly repulsed by the smell of the rabbit. He had reached the point where his stomach hurt from not eating, but the thought of eating made him want to throw up. It was a lose-lose situation.

"Well, eat up. We're going out tonight." Fawnfreckle spoke tactlessly, mischief lacing her thin voice as she broke Ravendusk out of his trance-like state, annoyance lightly following.

"What?" He responded, but the two before him didn't react.

"She said we're going out." Irisfrost shrugged.

"Yeah, I heard her. Are you both out of your mind?"

"Not in the slightest." Fawnfreckle answered, the nonchalance in her voice as typical as ever. Ravendusk wanted to be mad, but he didn't have it in him. If anything, he was almost appreciative that the two siblings didn't treat him like he was fragile, even though he was.

"Fine." Ravendusk grumbled, eyeing the rabbit before shuddering and taking a small bite, trying to ignore the shocked looks of excitement his two friends offered each other. Despite acting like nothing was different with him, he knew the two were surprised he complied.

He didn't want to, but he had nothing better to do. He took small nibbles of his prey and forced himself to swallow despite the urge to spit it out. He ate as much as he could before pushing it aside, ignoring Irisfrost's look of disapproval as he pushed past them.

"Wait, Rave." Irisfrost called out, causing the sable tomcat to hiss as he twisted around to face them.

"For what?"

"Frostfall wanted to go. She should be back from patrol soon." The tabby explained, speaking his words cautiously.

*Wonderful.*

"We could just tell her we forgot. She'll live." Fawnfreckle pitched in, but Ravendusk shook his head quickly.

"I'd never hear the end of it."

So the three sat under a branch to shade themselves from the light as they awaited the patrol, Fawnfreckle and Irisfrost chatting amongst themselves eagerly, trying to pull Ravendusk into the conversation but he didn't give them much to work with.

He was slowly growing to regret his decision, wanting nothing more than to curl up in his nest and let sleep spare him mercy from his

thoughts. But seeing how much his friends lit up, he didn't have it in him to let them down again.

Soon, the patrol arrived, led by none other his mother, Mauvebee, followed by Pearlpool, Frozenpaw, Whiteraven, Lotuspaw and Frostfall. Cats who had been sharing tongues and bathing in sunlight quickly got up to greet the returning warriors.

Ravendusk dragged himself to his paws as he followed his two tabby-patterned friends, soaking up his clan's excitement and forcing a smile as he met up with his mother.

"Hello, little one." Mauvebee purred, nudging his cheek. *Little one* had been a nickname she gifted him since kithood, carrying on into his adult life despite him being significantly bigger than her now. It annoyed him. Made him feel infantile.

"Hi mom." He spoke, voice bland but if his tone bothered her, she didn't show it.

"I caught a mouse! I caught a mouse!" A voice broke the moment between the mother and son as Frozenpaw's shrilly voice rang out and Ravendusk looked down at the pale ginger she-cat, her glossed over eyes staring at no one but still shining brightly. She had fought so hard to get to train as a warrior apprentice despite her lack of vision. Ravendusk was almost positive he felt a trickle of warmth swell his chest as he watched his clanmates congratulate the little she-cat.

"Seems like the hunting patrol was a success." A voice erupted as a black-and-gray tomcat nosed through the crowd. Fallowstar.

"Thanks to the apprentices, they were very resourceful. We'll make fine warriors out of them one day." Whiteraven answered, nodding his head respectfully to his leader which was returned.

"I'm sure you will." Fallowstar purred.

"Fallowstar, did you hear? I caught a mouse!" Frozenpaw repeated, nosing the prey to him eagerly.

"I never had a doubt you couldn't. Good job, Frozenpaw." The

leader affirmed, his tail patting her shoulder encouragingly before she grabbed the mouse and ran to the other apprentices to show off her feat.

"Anything of interest at the border?" Fireflare, the deputy, spoke this time.

"Nope. I think we can all breathe a little easier. The war is behind us now." Frostfall spoke, her voice gentle however she glanced at Ravendusk as she said it. He knew she was saying that for him and not the deputy.

"With new-leaf on the rise, SummerClan seems to be in good paws. StarClan has been kind." Mauvebee added, the rest of the patrol murmuring in agreement.

"They have. Good job, everyone. Take the rest of the day off. You've all earned it." Fallowstar concluded, giving a final nod to his clan as everyone began to break away into their own groups. Mauvebee nudged her son one final time before she headed off to share tongues with his father, leaving Ravendusk alone with his friends and mate.

"I'm excited to see Frozenpaw grow up, she's going to be one to remember. Mark my words." Irisfrost mewed when just his friends remained.

"Oh, I'm sure. Should've seen her, would never be able to tell she was blind." Frostfall responded, her tail flicking contently.

"We ready to go?" Fawnfreckle interrupted, glancing around to meet everyone's eyes.

"You actually convinced him to come?" Frostfall queried, her question directed to Fawnfreckle as if he couldn't answer himself.

"They didn't have to." Ravendusk grimly replied, forcing his mate to break her gaze away from the tabby and meet his own. He couldn't quite read her expression as she narrowed her eyes.

"I'm proud of you." She finally responded, the strange look in her gaze now replaced with something kinder as she licked his cheek.

He didn't offer her anything back.

The four stood from their spot and made their way outside of camp, the falling sun coating the sky in a multitude of different colors. He used to appreciate the beauty of sunset, but now it felt lackluster.

They didn't make it very far as Ravendusk felt something— someone— brush past him in a blur of white fluff.

"Cloudpaw!" Fawnfreckle hissed, yellow eyes giving the young apprentice a deathly glare. "What are you doing out by yourself?"

"I wasn't." He spoke nonchalantly, head tilted to the side. "I followed you out."

"Don't you have your own friends? You don't have to bother me when I'm with mine." She spat in irritation.

"Why are you so uptight right now? You're up to something, and I wanna come." The little apprentice insisted.

"Making demands?" Fawnfreckle condemned. "No."

"Come on, just let him. I need someone to keep me company, you're all too high strung sometimes." Irisfrost groaned, sighing dramatically.

"Oh right, forgot your mind never matured past an apprentice." Fawnfreckle snapped back hoarsely, her yellow eyes shining sharply in the light.

"Just let him, he should be fine." Frostfall countered, noticeably growing annoyed by the whole situation. Ravendusk prayed his friends would comply. Luckily StarClan appeared to be on his side because they finally did.

He hung in the back as he followed the siblings, ignoring as Cloudpaw ran around them causing typical apprentice nuisance. Every time he fell behind unknowingly, his mate would slow and allow him to catch up before they'd join back.

"So, what exactly are we doing?" Ravendusk whispered to her,

noticing the way she grew stiff. He knew he should be alarmed, but he wasn't phased. They could be walking him to a death trap and he didn't think he'd care.

"They said they found something." Frostfall spoke ambiguously, directing her gaze to Fawnfreckle and Irisfrost in reference to *they*.

"*Found something*?" Ravendusk repeated as a way to prompt her further, which she seemed very hesitant to do but alas, she did.

"They were by the SpringClan border near the twoleg dens, where the thunderpath is flooded with monsters. Near one of their huts, Irisfrost said there was this huge monster, bigger than any kind they'd seen before." Frostfall explained.

"I've been told curiosity killed the cat." Ravendusk muttered indifferently, however he smiled when he felt his mate laugh quietly beside him.

"Yeah, well, it's them. They have a ridiculous amount of luck with the amount of times they've placed themselves in situations like this and ended up okay." Frostfall added, her whiskers twitching in amusement.

"Like that time Fawnfreckle thought she could take on a badger." He said.

"Or that time Irisfrost tried to run on ice and it cracked." She added, the two finally meeting each other's gazes, pausing momentarily, before laughing.

And it wasn't forced or faked. It was genuine.

"I missed you." Frostfall quietly whispered after a short silence, her voice sounding more vulnerable than it had.

"Yeah." He whispered back, looking down at his paws for a moment before he met her crystalline eyes again. "Me too."

"Alright lovebirds, we're here." Fawnfreckle teased.

"Well, kinda." Irisfrost quickly added.

"I'm unimpressed." Cloudpaw deadpanned.

"You always are." His tabby mentor replied coolly.

"Where even are we? This isn't our territory." Ravendusk questioned, falling back into his previous feelings of regret. His nest sounded really appealing at this very moment.

"If we went the way near our border, we'd have to cross the part of the thunderpath that is constantly swarmed. This part is much calmer." Irisfrost answered before turning around smugly at his friends. "Unless you want a challenge."

"Only if you go first." Frostfall shot back, offering him a condescending smile.

"My friends are a lot sharper than all of you combined." Cloudpaw broke the friendly feud, causing them all to stare at him in irritation.

"Then you can go first. Since you're so smart, of course." Fawnfreckle retaliated back, silencing the apprentice who only huffed in response.

"Okay, we'll just cross here." Irisfrost concluded, waiting for anyone to speak against him, but they didn't. He approached the thunderpath slowly, ears perked as he listened for any upcoming monsters. Once he knew it was safe, the dark brown tabby sprinted across the paved path and successfully made it to the end, twisting around with beaming yellow eyes as he beckoned for his friends to follow.

Fawnfreckle was next, forcing Cloudpaw to go with her as the two dashed to the end. Ravendusk then waited as his mate approached the path. Ears perked, she made her way to the end swiftly as she met up with the others.

Ravendusk sighed reluctantly, shocked to find himself feeling a little nervous as he approached the thunderpath, looking both ways. Once he felt it was safe, he began his sprint, the path below him rough on his paws. He met the yellow line before he heard

Frostfall's distressed yowl and he was left frozen, twisting around to see a monster hurling right towards him, it's obnoxiously bright eyes blinding him.

Next thing he knew the monster was making a foreign noise, as if it was screaming at him. It messily switched to the other side of the thunderpath, clearly losing control. He felt teeth grab into his neck as Frostfall dragged him to the other side and the last thing he heard were the screeches of the monster as it aligned back to the thunderpath

"Are you okay?" Irisfrost exclaimed, yellow eyes wide.

"He's okay." Frostfall panted, her voice shaking as she spoke. "Good luck, remember?" She added, specifically for him to hear.

"Yeah." Ravendusk heaved, trying to calm his nerves as he stood to his trembling paws, giving the thunderpath a final look. "*Good luck."*

"Wouldn't be a proper outing without a near death experience." Fawnfreckle rasped quietly, trying to lighten the mood though it was obvious even she was a little shaken by the event.

"Let's just keep going, yeah?" Ravendusk mewed, the others nodding in agreement. He remained quiet on the rest of their journey, allowing his thoughts to take over. He was sure he had lost care for his life, but he wasn't sure anymore. In just those few moments, he found himself not wanting to die. He wasn't ready.

He supposed he still clung to hope despite how far away it felt.

"We're here." Fawnfreckle said, almost breathlessly, as she gazed out upon the monster as if it was some kind of prized possession.

"Holy StarClan." Cloudpaw gasped, his jaw nearly on the ground as his mentor looked at him smugly.

"When you said big, I didn't think *this big."* Frostfall admitted, looking around cautiously.

"The monster itself isn't even the best part. It's what's inside." Irisfrost chimed, nudging the white she-cat encouragingly.

"We're going inside?" Ravendusk spoke, not hiding the distaste in his voice as he watched the two siblings look at each other and nod excitedly. He didn't want to argue, so he quietly sighed and the group made their way towards the monster.

It was not like the ones he'd seen before, like the one which nearly left him for roadkill, but taller, and longer. Towards the back it was opened, and Fawnfreckle jumped right in.

"Are you crazy?" Frostfall hissed.

"It's fine, it's been here all day. It's not going anywhere." Irisfrost reassured, nudging Cloudpaw up as the two leapt into the opening.

Ravendusk looked at his mate briefly, sharing a look of uncertainty before they followed their friends, seemingly being the only two who thought this was a bad idea.

Immediately smells of fish filled his nose, and Ravendusk silently cursed at himself for not eating the entire rabbit from earlier as his stomach growled.

"Wow." Frostfall murmured, her eyes darting around like a wonderstruck kit as she took in all the contained prey around them.

"We could feed the clan for moons with all this." Irisfrost grinned, looking at him as if he had won something. "Do you understand now?"

"Uh huh." Ravendusk hummed absentmindedly as he allowed himself to take in the view of all the prey.

"And look," Fawnfreckle beamed as she clawed through the clear confines of the fish, "it's easy to open."

"Fallowstar will be so amazed, he'll forget to be mad." Irisfrost assured, his eyes glowing in the dim light.

"Will he?" Cloudpaw retorted, though it was evident he was just trying to get under his skin.

"Don't speak unless you're spoken to." Fawnfreckle snapped from

where she remained perched beside her confiscated fish.

Ravendusk watched as his friends investigated everything around them, too caught up in their new scenery to hear the approaching steps outside.

Darkness.

Ravendusk didn't have time to process what had just happened until he felt the monster which had concealed them begin to roar, and to his utter horror, he felt his stomach grow weak as they began to move.

First he and his friends fell into a collective, terrified silence, but when the reality settled, all he heard were terrified screams.

# chapter 2

He didn't know what to do as arguments broke loose between everyone; Frostfall being the most vicious of all, hissing insults for getting them in this situation in the first place.

She was right, he duly noted, but despite his own addled state he knew she was being unfair. He was curled up in a corner, his claws trying to dig into anything, but the material was too strong. None of them could keep their balance, so Ravendusk just allowed his body to move shakily. Suddenly he wasn't so regretful about not eating the entire rabbit, because he knew it would've came up long ago.

He glanced up, his eyes adjusting to the dark as he looked at everyone. Irisfrost had his head bowed, appearing guilty while Fawnfreckle and Frostfall continued to give each other vile glances, their eyes spewing more hate than words could ever do.

Cloudpaw stayed near Ravendusk, seeming to watch it all unfold as well. Despite everything, the smell of fear was heavy in the air and they all shared it. They had no idea where they were going, how far they were going or if they'd even make it out alive.

He wasn't sure how long they were in there, but it seemed like an entirety, the sounds from the outside world taunting them from where they were locked inside.

Eventually, everything stopped, and it was then that the black tomcat realized how dizzy he was. Standing shakily to his paws, Ravendusk peered cautiously to where the opening was, eyeing it carefully.

"What's the plan?" Irisfrost asked, panicked, as he stood alongside everyone else.

"You got us in this mess, what's *your plan?"* Frostfall sneered, the venom tainting her usually soft voice uncanny.

"One more word from you and I swear I will shove your tail so far down your throat it'll reach your-" Fawnfreckle halted abruptly as her brother swatted her shoulder with his tail, offering her a look which silently told her it wasn't worth it.

"When it opens, just run. Run and don't look back." Ravendusk said, though he didn't sound as confident as he would've liked.

"That's your plan? And if the twolegs try and attack?" Cloudpaw asked, skeptically, his blue eyes glaring in the darkness.

"Most twolegs aren't aggressive, they probably don't even know we're here." The black tomcat explained as he looked down to him. "Besides, what other option do we have?"

"We always said we wanted to be more spontaneous." Irisfrost laughed nervously, though no one shared his panicked humor.

"This wasn't exactly what I had in mind." His sister whispered, thin voice cracking.

Silence followed and it was deafening and all Ravendusk could hear was the hushed breathing of his friends, each of them preparing for whatever it was they were going to face. Moments passed, he was beginning to fear the opening would remain closed and now he was really cursing at himself for even going at all. He could be home, curled up in his nest, sleeping away his problems.

"On the bright side, if we're trapped here, we have enough food to last us for moons." Irisfrost blurted. The tabby had always made inappropriate comments when he was nervous.

"Not the time." Fawnfreckle scolded, sighing in frustration as tensions continued to build.

Ravendusk felt his heartbeat quicken as noise bustled around outside, and he crouched lower and wriggled his hindquarters, eyes down to slits as he prepared himself. It felt slow, excruciatingly so, but he could hear the opening being tampered with and soon daylight began to creep through the small crevices as they began to grow wider. *It was now or never.*

As soon as it was open, Ravendusk didn't waste a single second as he shot forward, releasing a near shriek as he leapt out, coming face-to-face with a twoleg and extending his claws. To his surprise, the twoleg seemed just as frightened as him as it released a strange cry and swatted him away. As he fell to the ground, he lost footing and nearly tripped over his paws but managed to fix his step as he made a run for it, praying that the others were on his heels.

It was a terrain like no other, immense, towering twoleg dens which seemed to touch the skyline scattered everywhere, monsters screaming as he dashed through a swarmed thunderpath which was placed between the rows of twoleg homes. He had no idea where he was going, but he eventually made it to the other side where he was completely surrounded by twolegs walking around. He stood, frozen in shock as he was kicked left and right, his breathing growing hitched. He couldn't see past them, they seemed limitless.

"Rave! This way, come on!" Irisfrost screeched and he had never been so relieved to hear his friend's voice. He looked around desperately until his green eyes locked with a blazing yellow, and he maneuvered his way through trampling twolegs to reach him. Once he did, they both made a run for it, and to his relief the others were all accounted for.

Ravendusk's eyes widened as a young twoleg went to grab Frostfall, grabbing her by the scruff and hugging her tightly. He watched as his mate hissed, clawing the twoleg child before it released her and began to wail, and later, who he presumed to be the twoleg's mother, was kicking Frostfall away.

"You okay?" He queried, concern lacing his voice but she swatted him away as she got to her paws.

"Looks clear over there." Fawnfreckle heaved, exhaustion evident in her eyes as she nudged her battered apprentice to move faster. The group made their way into an area between the tall twoleg huts, getting kicked and trampled in the process as their bloodied paw pads grazed the harsh ground beneath them. Alas, they made it, gasping to catch their breath.

"I have *never,"* Frostfall paused to allow herself more time to catch

her breath, "seen so many twolegs in my life."

"Where in StarClan's name are we?" Cloudpaw asked, licking the blood at his paws and wincing as he did so.

"Think it's called a city." Fawnfreckle answered apathetically, her voice entirely drained as she hung her head down low. "Remember hearing Floodgaze talk about it before. Some kind of twoleg swarm."

"Ci-de?" Cloudpaw repeated, cocking his head to the side.

"City." She repeated.

They all fell into silence once again, which for once Ravendusk didn't mind. His brain was working in overdrive, and for the first time in moons, he felt like his survival instinct was intact. Although now he wasn't so sure it was worth it.

The sable tomcat looked out from where they had found refuge, watching as the twolegs hurried amongst themselves and the putrid smell of monsters burned at his nose. He wanted a way to fix this, but he was lost.

"I think we're safe here, for now at least. Let's just try and sleep. We can figure something out when we wake up." The black tomcat suggested, and for once the entire group seemed to agree while Frostfall offered to take first watch.

He padded towards a small wooden twoleg creation and curled inside of it, yet despite how exhausted he was, he couldn't sleep. The *city* or whatever it's called was loud and no matter how tired he was, his anxiety wouldn't allow him any mercy. So he stayed like that, clinging onto hope that sleep would take over, but it never did.

Ravendusk jumped out and looked to his sleeping clanmates, though the way they squirmed was proof enough they were struggling just as much as him. He watched them for a brief moment before glancing to Frostfall. She was sat upon a square-like thing which reeked, holding decaying twoleg food anong other foul

things which he didn't care to know. He jumped up and sat beside her, but she didn't move. He followed her gaze which was stretched out to watch the twolegs. The sun was setting, spreading a vermillion light across her white fur as she looked out longingly.

Finally, she spoke.

"You think we'll ever go home again?"

Ravendusk was quiet for a moment. He could sugarcoat it for her, but that was never really his thing. Honestly, he didn't know. He wanted to tell her yes, but that was naive, and even she knew it.

"I hope." He settled with that, which seemed to be his saving grace these past few moons. Maybe clinging onto hope was childish, he couldn't really tell anymore. It all felt pointless.

"You know, I really needed you these past few moons, and you were never there." The white she-cat spoke quietly and he felt a pit form in his stomach.

"I understand losing Aloepetal hurt, but we all lost someone. I lost you."

"I know." Was all he could say. He wanted to comfort her, but how could he? She was right, she always had been. He broke away from everyone when his sister died, and he felt horrible about it, he really did. He justified it in his head, convincing himself it was because he was a danger to them. Secretly, he that was an excuse, and that made it worse.

"You are selfish." Frostfall spoke again, her gaze not meeting his once as she did. She didn't even look like she was breathing. "I took care of you for so long and you never once asked me if I was okay."

"*Frostfall.*" He said, but with no direction, just pain. While she looked ahead, he looked at her, silently begging her to reciprocate his eye contact. She never did.

They never had a perfect relationship. At first, maybe, but it wasn't perfect for long. They fell in love young, going on about some spiritual tie they had tactlessly convinced themselves bonded them;

existing on the same wavelength, all those things you believe in when you are young. But that only lasted a few moons.

She had mood swings like no other, one moment she'd be fine, then the next she'd be throwing a tantrum. When they were freshly-made warriors, Frostfall had went crazy on him for being friends with Fawnfreckle, constantly accusing him of being in love with the tabby. He never was, they had been best friends forever, but she convinced herself. It almost destroyed his friendship with Fawnfreckle. Then she would whine whenever he'd hang out with Irisfrost, saying that he never prioritized her despite making time for her every day. Whenever he was with *anyone* who wasn't her, she found a way to make it a problem.

Frostfall always had security problems, and he was willing to work through that before Aloepetal's death, but sometimes it felt irremediable. He loved her too much to leave her. Maybe that made him weak. He didn't really care. But she was right about one thing; she did take care of him after the war, and had his old self known how dependent he had grown, he'd be disappointed. He knew she needed emotional support, but he was in no state to give it at the time. He still wasn't.

"I'll be better." He assured after a long silence, and she finally looked at him with that same unreadable expression from earlier.

"Yeah. I hope so."

~~~

The next morning came painfully slow and he didn't have a minute of rest. None of them did. They were beaten, starved and spiritless. Even if they could make it through the barricade of twolegs, they still would have to pass the bustling thunderpath, and the other side was the same as the side they already inhabited.

Ravendusk approached the group as they talked amongst themselves, trying to come up with a plan but none of them had any idea where to start, and he was no exception.

"We're screwed no matter what we do." Fawnfreckle muttered under
~~~

her breath, taunting an ant with her claw as she spoke.

"How optimistic." Irisfrost retorted.

"We wouldn't be in this situation in the first place if you didn't drag us here. This is your fault, you do realize that?" Frostfall sneered from where she sat beside her mate, crystalline eyes glaring menacingly at the other she-cat.

At her accusing words and threatening stare, Fawnfreckle crushed the ant she had been toying with as she stood to her paws, snarling with the same contempt.

"I am *so sick* of your holier-than-thou attitude. No one forced you to go anywhere, but of course perfect little Frostfall can do no wrong. I'm starting to find gratitude in this entire situation, maybe it'll snap you out of your self-obsessed bubble."

"Okay, maybe let's all calm down-"

"Don't fight my battles for me Ravendusk." Frostfall hissed. "You know I'm right, Fawn. This isn't even the first time you've put us all in danger, but you never can learn, can you?"

"*You are dead*." The tabby spit, claws unsheathing deftly as she approached the pale white she-cat, but before she could attack, Ravendusk stood between them.

"I'm serious," he paused, "calm down before you both do something you regret." He was demanding now, and for a moment he wasn't sure either of them heard him as they continued to stare viciously into one another.

"Fine, she's not even worth it." Fawnfreckle retorted, backing down and refusing her brother's comfort as she did so, warning him to let her be.

Ravendusk finally let out the breath he had been holding in, eyes closing in relief. If starvation didn't kill them, it would definitely be each other.

"Do you guys smell that?" Cloudpaw spoke up, his nose pointed to

the sky as his ears pinned uncomfortably. Ravendusk didn't have time to react before a growling noise drifted into his perked ears, his fur raising instantly as he slowly turned around to be met with two very large dogs, sharp teeth bared ruthlessly. The universe must be against them; there was no way they were this unfortunate.

"Cloudpaw," Fawnfreckle commanded, "get behind me *now."* For once, the white apprentice didn't argue as he frantically shielded himself behind his mentor.

"What do we do?" Irisfrost pleaded, looking at his clanmates with terror-stricken eyes. "*What do we do?"* He repeated with more intensity.

Ravendusk didn't know. This was a death sentence waiting to happen and they all knew it. He watched as the dogs began to circle the group of cats, goading them.

The sable tomcat knew they weren't making it out of this, there was no way, but as he closed his eyes and braced himself for what he knew to be a brutal death, nothing ever came. The warrior opened his eyes cautiously, head tilting as he saw three figures stood upon the surface holding human waste.

Three other cats.

"Over here morons." One of them provoked, a dilute gray tomcat, a challenging glint shining feverishly in his dark green gaze. Ravendusk watched as the dogs' attention switched, and suddenly they were chasing the newcomers while one stayed behind. A large, scarred black-and-white tomcat.

The black warrior remained on edge, waiting carefully as the large feline came closer, however he relaxed when he waved his tail in friendly greeting.

"You all look as though you've seen a ghost." He chuckled, however the assembled cats were far too shaken to share his amusement so instead they stared in confused silence.

"Oh, sorry, where are my manners?" The stranger exclaimed, eyes

widening as he nodded curtly in formal greeting. "My name is Ares."

"Are the other two, are they okay?" Irisfrost questioned hesitantly.

"Don't worry about them. Those mutts are nothing in comparison to my combatants. They'll have those savages running all throughout the city, they'll be chasing their own tail before they know it." Ares responded, oddly nonchalant.

No one responded, however the scarred tomcat wasn't bothered by it.

"You lot look horrible. No offense."

"None taken." Ravendusk answered before Fawn or Frost could, not willing to risk either of them screwing their only chance of escape. "We got lost. We have no idea where we are."

"San Francisco."

"What?" Frostfall questioned with a disdain that made Ravendusk wince.

"The city of San Francisco." Ares repeated as if any of them had any idea where or what that was, but he quickly caught on to that fact so he changed the subject.

"How about I take you to my home, get you all cleaned up and fed." He spoke with a diplomacy that felt a little feigned but Ravendusk figured they really had no other choice.

"That would be great." Irisfrost thanked, not hiding his gratitude, but Rave couldn't shake the bad feeling that settled deep within him, but he was in no condition to argue.

"Wonderful." Ares grinned, and something about it was chilling, or maybe he was just delirious. Ravendusk wasn't even sure anymore.

"You will *love* Central Point."

。゜•□ɔ♡e□•゜。

Baby let the games begin. For real.

Things only get crazier from here, so I'm excited to share that. Hope you all have a great day!

# chapter 3

[image]

Ravendusk was impressed by the stranger's knowledge about the *city*. He knew every possible way to avoid twoleg interaction, leading the clan cats through a darkened tunnel beneath the thunderpath. The tunnel was slightly flooded with gelid water due to the recent downpour, but the black tomcat couldn't even bring himself to mind. He was just glad to be out of there.

He remained quiet after introducing himself, drowning out the inquiries from his friends as they fell into curious conversation with Ares. He listened for awhile, but grew uninterested. Now that he wasn't in active danger, his previous feelings were beginning to slowly drift back. For a moment he contemplated just taking off, running anywhere his legs could take him. Away from everyone in his life. Forget about them. Forget about who he used to be and just start over.

But that was callow. It didn't matter how far he went, how much he conditioned himself to forget, that hollow feeling would always remain.

"Sorry about the water, the weather hasn't been too kind recently." Ares apologized, however Rave was sure none of them cared. Honestly, it was soothing to his aching paw pads.

"No need. Anything is better than where we were before." Frostfall replied, falling back into her tone of feigned softness that he always hated.

"Through here, it'll take us home."

*Home.*

Ravendusk couldn't brush off the unnerving feeling the scarred tomcat gave him, speaking as if they were not guests but yet already apart of his clan, or society, whatever it may be.

He didn't question it, but as the tunnel opened up into a large, presumably abandoned twoleg den, he looked around in awe. It was nothing he could've ever imagined.

"Welcome to Central Point." Ares welcomed, twisting around to face his guests as he took in their collective admiration.

The walls were very high, and although he couldn't see the sky, he was sure it had to reach the clouds. All around him were cats conversing amongst each other, some playing with old bones while others sparred. Some didn't pay him and his friends any attention while others looked up in what he could only imagine as curiosity.

These dens weren't like his dens back home. The walls weren't made from dried mud and stone but instead artificial twoleg material. Within it where smaller dens, more than he could count, and hanging from the top was a large crystal of some sorts. He was sure Silentfeather would know what it was, if she were here. Towards the back was a huge pathway, elevated in steps which took you to higher levels. Truth be told, he had never been inside a twoleg den, but he could've never imagined them to look like this.

He continued to follow Ares, noticing the way every cat they passed had bowed their head to the scarred tomcat. An act of respect, he supposed. Still found it odd. Fallowstar would never subject his clan to something which Rave found to be demeaning, however he reminded himself that it wasn't fair to hold this place to the same standards of SummerClan.

Ares led them up what he called *the stairwell*, quickly noting for them to watch their step with that same sly smile that made the black tomcat's stomach churn with unease. He continued to lead them through one of the dens inside of the main cavern and Ravendusk didn't think this place could shock him any more. He was wrong.

Inside, the walls were decorated with flowers; fake flowers. It was as if they had been painted on with the juices of berries, or whatever twolegs may use. Towards the back was the nest where the inhabitants of this den slept, and they were huge. Could fit at least two full families, he estimated. They were much bigger than

his nests back home, though it wasn't really a nest. Looked nothing like one. It was another twoleg thing, he supposed.

Ares led them through an opening which led outside and Ravendusk had to squint his eyes in the blaring sunlight, but as he adjusted, he walked to the edge and looked down, nearly throwing up from how high up they were. He could see the entire city and past it, although his ears perked up when in the faint distance, hazy in the fog, were the indistinct view of mountains.

*Home.*

"Cove, Sybil, here please." Ares commanded, tail flicking impatiently as he did so. Ravendusk broke his gaze away from the view to be met with two approaching she-cats, his eyes narrowing attentively.

"Fresh meat." One of them spoke, the more muscled of the two. "Let me tour the neophytes just once, they seem worthy of my time."

"Sybil, watch your tongue." The smaller of the two countered. He supposed she must be Cove. Ares seemed to ignore the banter between the two.

"I want you all to meet my two daughters. Sybil is my eldest, and once I return to the ground, she will take my place as ruler." He explained, and Rave examined the she-cat before him. Muscles rippled beneath her short white fur and her ears were abnormally long and pointed. Her face was small and her crystalline eyes were slanted and intimidating. He noticed the way she carried herself, chin tipped and expression conceit. *If looks could kill,* he quickly thought.

"And this is Cove. I expect her to show you how things are done around here. She will make you feel right at home, won't you dear?"

"Of course, father." She spoke, derision thinly coating her tone. She was smaller than her sister with slightly long calico fur and sage eyes that shone with a very faint defiance. While Sybil held herself with what Rave might call *superior class*, the calico before him seemed much more withdrawn and not nearly as threatening.

"I'm glad." Ares mewed, holding eye contact with his younger daughter with an uncomfortably formidable glare before nodding curtly. Expressing his way of farewell, he and Sybil left the calico alone with the newcomers.

Ravendusk made brief eye contact with Frostfall, the two sharing a look of uncertainty. He wasn't sure what they had gotten themselves into, but if his gut was right, it wasn't good.

"So-" Cloudpaw was cut off abruptly by the calico she-cat, her tone harsh.

"You shouldn't have come here."

The clan cats looked to each other, and Ravendusk was quickly realizing that he wasn't alone in his looming feelings of dread. They all seemed just as uncertain as him.

"What do you mean?" Irisfrost questioned carefully, head tilted as he bore his gaze into the brindled feline before him.

"It was either here or dead. What would you have chosen?" Fawnfreckle retaliated, voice breaking as she did so.

"The latter." Cove answered quickly, far too quickly for Rave's liking. "I don't know where you any of come from, but I promise you anywhere is better than this place."

"Explain." Ravendusk demanded, and this time the multicolored feline locked her green eyes with his own, commiserate now evident on her once solidified expression.

"I wouldn't even know where to begin." She answered, her voice sounding pathetically defeated. "You will find out soon enough, that I can guarantee."

。゚•□ɔ♡e□•゚。

Out of all the chapters I've already written for this, this one is my least favorite. But!! We will find out what Cove means in the next chapter, to a degree.

The collage below is a little visual of how I imagined Central Point to look like!

# chapter 4

*I wonder how I managed to end up*
*in this place*
*where I couldn't get away*

。˚ •□ɔ♡e□•˚ 。

*You will find out soon enough.*

The calico's words had been ingrained in his head as he and his friends followed her around. Her voice was apathetic and it was obvious enough that she wanted no part in being their guide.

Ravendusk didn't miss the callous gazes which where shot his way by the cats from the point, some spitting in their direction, others laughing at the sight of them. There were so many of them, the sable tomcat didn't understand how they had enough prey to keep them all fed.

"This is my favorite place." Cove said, a breakaway from the apathy finally leaving her tone. "No one really comes here."

Ravendusk looked around, and though they were inclosed, he could still see outside through the clear walls. It was strange. Vibrant greenery and flowers grew all around them, and it immediately reminded him of home.

"This is the garden. Whenever I wonder what life outside the city looks like, I come here." She explained, green eyes staring out longingly.

"This place doesn't do it justice." Frostfall answered, nose crunched in disgust.

"I'm sure it doesn't, but I'll take what I can get."

"If this place is so bad, why stay?" Fawnfreckle asked the question everyone was thinking. Cove froze, her eyes darting around

momentarily. She was processing the question, a grim expression lacing her features before she finally locked eyes with the tabby then shifted them to a pile of bones in the corner. Ravendusk followed her gaze, ears slowly pining as he did so.

"No one leaves. Many have tried, none succeeded."

"I can change that." Fawnfreckle retaliated with upmost confidence, but Ravendusk wasn't so sure. Her luck seemed to be running out on her.

"You'd be stupid to." The calico snapped back with that same confidence before lowly continuing. "But be my guest, get yourself killed. You'll just be forgotten and left to rot."

"How can you say that so indifferently?" Ravendusk questioned, not even hiding the horror in his voice.

"I learned a long time ago to stop caring, and if you want to survive, you'll do the same. I talk to cats like you all the time. You learn to get used it after awhile."

The black tomcat didn't speak after that as he looked around, slowly letting the reality of their new world settle within him. Maybe this was the world punishing him for being so selfish, but even then it didn't seem fair.

"For what its worth I am sorry." She spoke, genuinely, as she looked down to Cloudpaw. "Keep the little one around you, they'll view him as an easy target."

"I'm smarter than my age suggests." Cloudpaw retorted, though the shake in his voice didn't hide his fear.

"Intelligence has nothing to do with, kid. It's how they perceive you. No one here has a care in the world about anything below surface level. They're going to take one look at you and all they'll see is a sitting duck."

Ravendusk watched as Fawnfreckle hissed in response, pacing around as she scraped one of the flowers. She didn't speak, so the others watched in silence as she allowed her frustration to bleed.

"If these cats don't kill you Fawn, so help StarClan I will. *You* got us into this, and acting out is just going to make it worse. Own up to your consequences that we all have to pay." Frostfall sneered as she approached the tabby, neck and neck with her, but Fawnfreckle just stared at her with crazed eyes.

"Frostfall, leave it alone." Irisfrost intervened, quickly approaching his sister defensively.

"You're not so innocent either. You're always playing into her dangerous antics, enabling her over and over again."

At this, Ravendusk approached his mate, tail laying comfortingly on her shoulder to calm her down. "We have bigger things to worry about now, just drop it." She looked at him, and for a moment he thought she was going to protest, but she sighed reluctantly and stepped back.

"Cove?"

A voice broke the tensions and Rave perked his ears at the new voice, turning around slowly as his gaze met a diffident pair of green eyes.

The new feline looked startled as she realized her calico counterpart wasn't alone, freezing immediately. She had a coloring unlike any cat he'd seen before with ashen white fur and strange gray colorings. However what stuck out most to him was the scar which ran from her chest all the way down to her stomach, and though it was healed now, he couldn't help but wonder where she had gotten it.

"Cress, it's okay. They're *mainly* harmless." Cove reassured, briefly eyeing Frostfall when she emphasized "mainly."

Ravendusk watched the new she-cat who still seemed uneasy, but after a few moments she relaxed and cautiously approached their brindled guide, whispering something inaudibly in her ear. It couldn't be good given the brief look of panic that flashed beneath Cove's eyes.

Suddenly the two she-cats were quickly leaving, and he was stunted for a moment, but after a quick nod from his mate, they were quickly following.

"You're about to get your first taste of what the point is like." Cove urgently spoke, picking up speed as he followed loosely behind, shaking his head in confusion.

"What do you mean?" He asked, aimlessly, but how could he not? He had no idea what he was expecting and his mind wouldn't grant him the mercy of composure.

Cries could be heard, and his heart dropped when he realized they weren't just any cries, but the wails of kits.

"Rave I'm scared." Frostfall whispered alarmingly as she leaned into him and all he could do was accept her touch, because he was in no position to comfort her when he felt her same fear.

They all stopped abruptly when they watched as cats from the point were pushing and directing a set of screaming kits, some wailing for their mothers while others looked around in horror.

"It's okay Cressida." He heard Cove whisper to her strangely colored friend, nudging her gently but her friend seemed dazed, as if she was reliving a horrific memory.

"What is this?" Cloudpaw queried in a voice all too demanding for Rave's liking, and for awhile no one answered as they stared at one of the cats hissing threateningly at a kit begging to go home.

"Kits from our rivals." Cove answered, her jaw trembling in anger. *So much for not caring,* the sable tomcat couldn't help but think. "They were taken."

"Why?" Irisfrost asked, conviction not straying from his strained voice.

"Stone Height stole resources from us, and as Ares would say, their future had to be confiscated."

"You talk like these kits are objects and not actual beings."

Ravendusk retaliated, meeting her fiery gaze.

"To Ares, they are." Cressida weakly answered for her.

"What's going to happen to them?" Cloudpaw questioned, but with the hesitance in his voice, he wasn't sure he wanted the answer.

"They'll be trained here. No one is coming to get them."

"Not even their mothers?" Ravendusk asked.

"Wouldn't be surprised if they were already dead." Cove said.

No one said another word. What was there to even say? They remained there for longer than he would've liked, drowning in the face of their new reality. More than anything he wanted to reach out and guide the kits to him, protect them from the world, take them home, or anywhere as long as it wasn't here. But he couldn't do that.

All he could do was watch.

~~~

"There is no way I'm staying here." Fawnfreckle declared, toying with the remains of her mouse as she fixated on it.

"You heard Cove, it's a death trap. We're prisoners without the courtesy of calling it so." Ravendusk replied, looking at his tabby friend but she never looked up.

"What's the point of living if this is all it is? We have to at least try." Frostfall added, Irisfrost nodding in agreement.

"Let's just wait it out. Figure this place out. We don't know what we're dealing with yet. If we want a chance of ever going home, we have to be smart." Ravendusk reasoned.

"You know how frustrating it is for something like *this* to happen to bring you back from the shell of a cat you were back home? Why do you even care, not like you were really living then so what's the difference?" His mate insulted and he felt her words sting. She was
~~~

frustrated, he knew that, so he justified her. But that didn't make it hurt any less.

"It's not just me anymore." He calmly replied.

"I wanna go home." Cloudpaw whispered, curled up in the corner with his head rested on his quivering paws.

"Yeah, we all do." His mentor retorted, causing Rave's fur to prickle. It was as if any time the apprentice said anything, Fawnfreckle was irritated. Like nothing he could say or do was ever enough to satisfy her. He never knew why. Luckily Irisfrost settled beside the small white cat and offered him comfort in his mentor's absence.

"I find it hard to believe that everyone here lacks any sense of morals. Cove doesn't, her friend doesn't. If we can gather as many of the good ones, surely we'd have a chance." Irisfrost pitched hopefully.

"I find it hard to believe that hasn't been tried before." Frostfall countered.

"Maybe, but what other choice do we have?"

"Cove doesn't seem like she has any interest in some revolution fantasy plan." Fawnfreckle reminded flatly.

"I couldn't give a rat's tail about a revolution, this place can burn for all I care. I just want to get out, with or without her." Frostfall muttered, blue eyes focused on her claws as she sheathed and unsheathed them.

"I can't stop thinking about those poor kits. Imagine how scared they are?" The darker tabby murmured from where he lay beside Cloudpaw who had finally dozed off into sleep.

"Makes me angry every time I think about it." Ravendusk seethed as tainted memories of little whimpers sounded gently in his mind, though he lowered his volume as Irisfrost quietly hushed him, reminding everyone of the apprentice who was sleeping.

As conversation continued on, Ravendusk just kept his eyes glued

on the small rise and fall of Cloudpaw's fluffy stature, obscure memories dancing tediously in his mind from when he was that age. Who he used to be was someone Ravendusk didn't recognize, but still, he couldn't imagine being so young and placed in this situation.

# chapter 5

It had been three days since Ravendusk and his clanmates had settled within the residence of Central Point, and as the days went on, he continued to grow homesick. He wasn't just missing his nest anymore, but SummerClan altogether. He was quickly realizing just how much he had been taking everything for granted.

The menacing stares from cats at the point never stopped, but it never went past that either. It was as if they got some kind of twisted enjoyment from taunting him. Or maybe it was all in his head. It was hard to tell sometimes.

Foxglove, the dilute tomcat who had led the dogs away from them those few days ago, had assigned Fawnfreckle and Frostfall to some kind of survey of a rival cat who had been taken hostage. Stone Height, he had learned, was the name of their adversary. Their biggest enemy, he supposed. He had no idea what was meant by "survey" but he wasn't sure he even wanted to know. Cloudpaw had joined along, by demand of his mentor.

Ravendusk had stayed behind with Irisfrost, the two sharing an unspoken worry for what their friends may be witnessing. The clan cats had been located to a den where many of the cats from Central Point slept, and though Ravendusk was in no mood to talk to any of them, his tabby counterpart tried to make friends. It was to no avail; the cats from the point would just scowl in rejection.

"Don't take it personally, they're not too keen with non-pure blood." Cove had spoken up to allow the others notice of her presence as she watched the rejection. Irisfrost just gave her a defeated look.

"Then why bother with stealing kits from their rivals? It's just setting those kits up for failure if no one is willing to listen to them because of their supposed 'non-pure' blood." Ravendusk reasoned, and he swore he could see her snort.

"They're not here to be listened to, they're here to serve as reprisal.

Ares finds ways to make them useful, anyways. And if they do fail, well, you can let your imagination fill in the rest." The calico explained, nonchalantly, as she tossed a few fishes to the two friends. They just stared at it blankly.

"It's not going to bite you." She reassured as she took in their uncertainty. Ravendusk still didn't move, but once Irisfrost finally gave in and began eating, he followed suit.

"Do you know why Foxglove wanted Frostfall and the others for the survey of that hostage?" Ravendusk inquired as he swallowed a bit of fish, feeling as it tamed his hunger.

"As a shadow, I suppose. They just interrogate the poor thing for intel." She answered, settling down as she spoke, feasting on her own fish.

"What do these interrogations usually look like?" Irisfrost asked.

"They start off pretty tame, just asking questions. Cats at the point are loyal, but so are the cats from the height. Some are easy, but many refuse to give up information. Then it turns brutal, trust me when I say you don't want to be apart of it."

"And if Ares gets the information he wants, what happens to the hostage?" Ravendusk asked, watching as the calico processed the question, chewing slowly in contemplation.

"It's different every time. Sometimes, if they're easy to get information from, Ares will kill them anyways. How he sees it, if they're willing to betray Stone Height that easily, then the same can be said for here. If they straight up refuse, they're still killed, for obvious reasons. Some exceptions are made, but it's rare. Foxglove, for example, is an instance where a hostage was taken in. And now he's head combatant, with Zephyr."

"Foxglove was from Stone Height?" The black tomcat continued to question. She nodded.

"Is the height similar to the point?" Irisfrost asked this time, and she shrugged.

"No one really knows how things work there except for a few, but I do know they've never stolen kits from us in the middle of the night."

"When did conflict even begin?" Ravendusk prodded, still unsure about the politics which surrounded this place.

"Long before I was born. Long before my dad was born. It's just a constant power struggle of trying to stay on top and making sure the superior group has enough resources to sustain how we live. We're taught the history when we're young but the conflict has always remained the same, and no one in power cares to find accord because they gain some kind of sick enjoyment from it." She sighed, eyes dozing off momentarily in thought. "I've grown up in an active war zone my entire life."

"Do you think things will change when your sister succeeds your dad?" Irisfrost asked optimistically, but she shot that down quickly.

"Ever since Sybil could walk, she's been with my father. He's had a hold on her during the most vital stages of her life, indoctrinating her with his ideals, and they align. She's always in the front lines, and she always will be."

"And what about you?" Ravendusk grilled, not missing the flicker of aversion which lingered on Cove's face at his question.

"What about me?"

"Do you align yourself with those same ideals?"

"What do you think?" She shot back, almost challengingly, as they held each other in an ominous staring contest.

"You just confuse me, that's all. You act like you're morally above it at one point, then the next you're completely apathetic to everything bad that happens, as if it doesn't bother you at all."

"*Rave*." Irisfrost warned, but neither of them acknowledged him.

"I already told you, you get desensitized after awhile. Everything is fresh for you, it's not that hard to grasp how we might be reacting

differently. You'll learn to turn a blind eye eventually. Besides, if you aren't complicit with what happens at the point, it's not just your life you're endangering. It's everyone you care about, and I still have cats I'm wanting to protect."

"Cressida?" Ravendusk spoke, the hostility once lacing his voice now gone.

"She's one of 'em, but there are others." Cove shrugged, breaking eye contact as her eyes settled statically onto a wall.

Silence followed them and Ravendusk felt he had interrogated her enough, letting first impressions integrate with newfound knowledge. At first, he regarded her as detached. Someone who he, if he was back home, wouldn't have cared to know. But now he just felt bad for her. All of them, really.

Cove had stayed with the both of them that night, soon joined by Cressida, as the four finally found quiet comfort in one another, and dozed off to sleep.

It was comforting, in a sense. He felt as though he had made an ally in such a twisted place, and he could guess that for her, she had found someone who's hope was yet to be tainted with.

~~~

"Ravendusk!" A panicked voice screamed, and at first he thought he was dreaming, but as a shaken paw began aggressively prodding him, he awoke with a jolt to be met with blazing blue eyes.

"Frostfall?" He called, still delirious from how forcefully he had been woken. Once he focused on her, she appeared as if she had seen her entire family be slain in front of her, and quickly his confusion bled into fear.

"We have to leave, we have to leave *right now."*

"Okay, just, calm down. Talk to me." He reasoned, looking past her shoulder to see Fawnfreckle spewing all kinds of curses as her brother tried to still her.
~~~

"The survey, it was horrible. *Horrible*! They bit out his tongue, they just *bit it off*, then dragged us away. StarClan knows what they're going to do to him. Rave, *we have to leave*." She was speaking abnormally fast, her voice holding a type of vigor that was foreign for the pale she-cat. Ravendusk just stared at her, watching as her pupils switched from each of his in a frantic manor.

"She okay?" Cove asked from where she sat up tiredly.

"She will be." Ravendusk reassured, though he wasn't sure if he was answering her or trying to convince himself as he embraced his hysteric mate in an attempt of calming her.

"Did Cloudpaw see it?" He heard Irisfrost whisper to his sister, who shook her head.

"When things started to escalate, I told him to come back here." Fawnfreckle answered, but a dreadful realization crossed her face as she realized her apprentice was not with them. Her ears pined as she looked around. "*He's not here?"*

"Maybe he just got lost, I'm sure he's fine." Irisfrost soothed as he attempted to nudge her cheek, but she just hissed him away as she approached Cove and Cressida.

"Where is he?" She snarled, baring her teeth in an act of clear malice.

"I don't know. He's not my responsibility." Cove coolly responded, stepping in front of her ashen white friend who shrunk beneath her. Ravendusk just watched, unsure of what to do with his hyperventilating mate's face still pushed into his shoulder and a full on fight about to break out.

"You're the one who said he was an easy target, what did you mean by that?" The fiery tabby she-cat grilled, her tail slashing back and fourth threateningly. Ravendusk's attention was drawn back to Cressida as a knowing look crossed her face.

"I might have an idea."

# chapter 6

The group had steadily followed Cressida, watching as the ashen white feline weaved between cats from the point, some offering annoyed glances while others hissed from the rush of cats pushing between them.

Ravendusk struggled to keep up as he stumbled down the stairwell, amazed by how gracefully the two she-cats from the point mastered it, but then again, they had moons of living in this place over him.

The assembled felines were troubled with a daunting silence and an urgency that gnawed inside of him. He watched as Cressida quickly halted, having to deepen his footing in order not to crash into the others ahead of him. He followed her gaze to a secluded area under towering walls, a sinister glint immediately lurking beneath her blue eyes.

"Nothing ever changes." Cressida muttered under her breath, to herself he presumed, but everyone heard her. No one questioned her words, too frightened by what they may mean, so they just continued to hurriedly follow her down another incline.

Eventually distant taunting could be heard and Ravendusk made immediate eye contact with Fawnfreckle, her gaze hardening as her claws unsheathed and she aggressively pushed past Cressida, now catching scent of her apprentice and following it.

As he and the others caught up to her, he quickly realized they were in what Cove had called Chasm's Calling. A deep indent had formed within the centre of it. The calico had explained that when the humans still inhabited it, the hole had been filled with water and used as play. Now it's purpose was far less pleasant.

Ravendusk stood, stunned, as he watched three other apprentice-aged felines attacking Cloudpaw mercilessly.

Fawnfreckle immediately tackled the largest of the group, the two

rolling around in a hissing match as she pinned him beneath her weight, eyes blazing wildly. The smug look which was on the younger tomcat's face faded as he realized his opponent was far more threatening than he imagined.

The fight didn't last long as Cove intervened, shoving Fawnfreckle off and snarling in warning as the tabby redirected her blazing gaze towards the calico.

"Behave yourself before you make things worse." She advised, holding her stare for a few fleeting moments until she knew it was safe to continue. Once it was, Cove turned to the three younger felines with an unrelenting stare.

"Get lost." She threatened, tail lashing balefully. "Or I get my father involved, and you know what happens then."

The three of them nodded pathetically at her final threat, nearly tripping over themselves as they scurried away, disappearing into the darkness to leave their battered victim soaking in matted fur and blood.

"Cloudpaw." Frostfall whispered, settling beside the little tomcat who resembled her in color as she lapped at his bleeding wounds.

"What in StarClan's name were you thinking? I told you to go straight to Ravendusk. What were you doing? Loitering around? Taking in the scenery?" Fawnfreckle began accusing, ears pinned and raspy voice not holding even an ounce of compassion.

"Fawnfreckle." Irisfrost quietly spoke in an attempt to calm her down, but she continued to shoot piercing looks as she stared demandingly at her injured apprentice.

"I did." Cloudpaw croaked, wincing as Frostfall continued to clean his wounds. "They followed me. Cornered me. I screamed for help. No one came."

Ravendusk felt a pang hit his heart, his jaw gaping lightly as he stared down sympathetically at the wounded apprentice. Fawnfreckle calmed down at his words, a faint look of guilt dancing

around her eyes that shone like a dying wildfire.

"You think you can walk, kid? Our medics need to get those wounds checked out." Cove prompted, settling down to be at eye-level with him as he nodded, shakily standing to his paws with the help of Frostfall.

"We can't all go, a few of us should stay back." Cressida quietly explained, the others looking around for a brief moment, as if silently agreeing on who would stay and who would go.

Frostfall stayed behind with Irisfrost and Cressida while the rest of them helped a whimpering Cloudpaw through empty pathways to avoid any trouble from other cats at the point, Ravendusk remaining quiet as he took in the dull sights around him. He missed the greenery of the forest, the gentle trickle from the rill that ran all throughout his home. His life in comparison had felt so bland but at least his surroundings made up for it back in the forest. Now it was as if there was no release from the ache that had kept him trapped in his mind all this time. Even if he actually had something to focus on to keep those thoughts at bay, he knew he much preferred feeling numb as opposed to feeling constant fear.

"Through here." Cove instructed, stepping into an opening that was much too small for twolegs as she led them down a narrow path enclosed in cold, silver walls. Once they reached the end, it opened up into a larger den which was full of sick cats everywhere.

"This is horrible." Fawnfreckle whispered into her friend's ear and he just met her gaze with a look that shared her same disbelief.

"Lily, Sage, this is Cloudpaw. He was involved in an," Cove paused uncertainly, briefly looking at Ravendusk before looking back at the two she-cats he presumed to be the medics, "*accident*." She grimly concluded.

A white-and-gray she-cat just nodded in response as she began examining the apprentice, being gentle as she did so to relieve him of any more unnecessary pain.

"Will he be okay?" Ravendusk inquired, however the medic didn't

respond. She didn't even acknowledge that he was there as she remained entirely focused on Cloudpaw.

"He asked you a question." Fawnfreckle demanded, tail lashing impatiently, but neither of the medics reacted as they continued to tend to the bloodied cat before them.

"*Fawn.*" Cloudpaw quietly spoke, pleading with his mentor to calm down.

"Leave them be." Cove exhorted, something protective coating her voice as she spoke. She kept her eyes locked with the angered tabby for an uncomfortable amount of time before she drew her attention back to the medics, voice lowering. "Thank you both." She spoke, dipping her head as she dismissed herself.

Ravendusk watched her for a moment before he went after her, leaving Fawnfreckle to stay with her apprentice as he crawled through the tunnel they used to enter and met Cove on the other side.

"Hey, sorry about Fawnfreckle." He immediately apologized, holding sincerity as he did. "She's a bit hard to swallow at first, but she means well."

"Don't apologize for things you didn't do." The calico coolly responded, her green eyes staring out in a static state. He remained quiet for a moment as he watched her.

"About the medics-"

"They don't speak." Cove answered the question before he even asked, remaining in her trance-like state as she faintly sighed. He tilted his head, confused on what she meant by that. She must've noticed even if she didn't look at him because she continued.

"Medics are cats who failed in becoming combatants, and they are the lowest in the hierarchy at the point, only resting above a prisoner. They aren't allowed to speak unless it's deemed necessary, and even then they must have permission from Ares." She explained flatly, her impassive gaze softening slightly.

Ravendusk just stared at her, incredulity painted all over his expression as he looked down to his paws. He imagined Darkstream and Silentfeather, cats who he wholeheartedly believed to be the smartest cats in SummerClan, being subjected to such vile treatment.

"Where I come from," he started quietly, "our medics are some of the most respectable members. They're viewed as an asset to the clan and they're highly regarded for it." Cove finally looked at him and he met her gaze.

"Sounds nice." She weakly replied, however her tone wasn't condescending and yet more yearning. They continued to stare at each other, taking in each other's presence in a frail attempt of comforting each other, but it didn't really help.

"Tell me about it. Where you come from, I mean." She whispered with pleading eyes. He wasn't really in the mood to talk about his home, but he couldn't deny her when she was looking at him with a type of vulnerability he'd yet to get from her.

"We live near the mountains in a place called SummerClan. Trees, everywhere, with a small creek with the *freshest water* you'd ever taste running all around us. I don't think there is a single place that even comes close to the beauty of it all." He reminisced, closing his eyes and imagining it as he explained it to her.

"Is your family there?" She asked, innocently, but he still froze at the question. She immediately noticed his discomfort.

"You don't have to-"

"Yeah, my family is there. My mom and dad, Mauvebee and Whiteraven, are warriors. But our clan is much smaller than the point, so in a way, it's like we're all family. We look out for each other, you know?" He explained, feeling that yearn for his mother began to settle in a way that made him feel like a kit again.

"No, I don't know." She responded, and he was about to apologize for saying something so insensitive but she just looked at him reassuringly before he could. She seemed more aware than most.

"Clan life sounds incredible." She began, however her voice changed into something almost... playful? "My only issue is the dignity-killing names. *Ravendusk? Really?"*

"Shut up." He countered, pushing her shoulder with his own as she laughed in a way that he couldn't help but join along in.

"I guess Cloudpaw makes sense, he really does look like a cloud."

"Don't tell him that, you'll hurt his feelings." Ravendusk mused back.

"Oh, I don't mean it in a bad way. I think it's sweet." She assured, but he just shook his head as a small smile curved into his jaws.

"*Definitely* don't tell him that, then you'll really hurt his feelings." He explained, feigning a look of hurt to imitate the apprentice which caused the calico to fall into a fit of more laughter.

"This almost feels disrespectful." She sighed. "The poor thing is-"

"Hurt?" Ravendusk tried to finish her sentence, but Cove shook her head.

"I was going to say stuck to Fawnfreckle's insufferable side, but yeah, that too."

"You are horrible."

"Just speaking my truth."

"I swear, she's not *that bad* once you get to know her. She's just," Ravendusk paused to try and find the right word as Cove just stared quizzically at him, "strong-willed."

"You mean stubborn."

"Yeah, well, she can be both at the same time." He concluded, however the lightheartedness in their conversation never wavered. He was seeing so many new colors in the she-cat before him, pouring out in the way she talked and the life which seemed to flood once apathetic eyes. It was enlightening, in a weird way. Made his problems seem minuscule. She had to live like this since

she was born, yet she was so much stronger than he ever could be. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to handle it the way she has all these moons. Oddly, it made him feel worse.

Guilty maybe.

But really, it just made him feel weak.

# chapter 7

Days passed, blended, coated in the same color of misery no matter where he looked. Ravendusk was beginning to fade away from fear, or maybe he was getting used to it. It didn't make him brave. Not at all. Just made him numb, unfeeling to anything around him. He was sure he had exhausted every thought in his mind, toying around with the same what if questions over and over again until even they began to grow dull.

Despite the significant morality differences between SummerClan and Central Point, the way they lived was still very strange to him. Since the point was so large with so many members and neighboring locals, there was never a set of responsibilities placed on he or his friends. Or anyone for that matter. Hunts, patrols, scavenging, battle, punishments. Cats were randomly picked to help while the rest where left to fend for themselves, feed themselves, defend themselves against their own members. Despite being some kind of society, if he could even call it that, everyone in the point only looked out for themselves.

It was either kill or be killed, and no one even bat an eye when they'd pass a freshly deceased body unless it was someone deemed of higher superiority.

The sable tomcat allowed his thoughts to continue as he followed his friends, new and old, through the gray tunnel which led them to the medic's quarter. He hadn't seen Cloudpaw in days, not really having it in him too. He did care, deep down, but the emptiness he felt made it really hard to feel anything at all.

As Ravendusk pushed through towards the end, his eyes immediately locked on Lily, the white-and-gray medic who had been tending to Cloudpaw when he was first brought in. She was being insulted by another tomcat who she was currently treating. The black warrior watched as the aggressive tomcat continued to belittle her in such a way that was nauseating to watch. She couldn't even defend herself. She just had to sit there and take it,

not even sit there, but *help* the cat who was degrading her without the courtesy of even doing it in privacy.

He watched for longer than he intended, but he grew sick of seeing the events unfold knowing there was nothing he could do. He tore his attention away and fell into a sprint to catch up with the others who were already with Cloudpaw.

When Ravendusk caught up, he allowed his eyes to examine the apprentice, expecting him to be better but he was far from it. He looked frail, the dried blood still matted in his once vibrant white fur. His wounds seemed much more intense now, swelling to twice their previous size and infecting the area.

"He's so sick." Fawnfreckle whispered, looking down at him. She was the only one who had stayed with the apprentice and Ravendusk could only imagine the guilt she was feeling now. It was her who had made Cloudpaw go with her to the survey, and it was her who made him leave early.

"Don't let Ares know how bad he is." Cressida advised quietly, everyone directing their gazes to the ashen feline in further question, but she just looked at her paws pathetically.

"Why?" Fawnfreckle quickly asked, her yellow eyes fixating urgently on the strangely-colored she-cat. No answer came, so fervently she asked once more.

"*Why?"*

"He will be killed on sight." Cove answered for her, quieting everyone as they all looked down to the sick apprentice. "Seems like he has some kind of blood poison from the infection, and the prognosis of that is not really favorable."

"So what, you're saying he's dead either way?" Frostfall grilled, her blue eyes widened in a way that displayed her fear to everyone in full capacity.

"I'm saying no one really comes back from an illness like this. Just be prepared." The calico explained in a way to control the damage

her words were inflicting, but if Ravendusk had learned anything about her, it was that she was honest.

Cloudpaw was curled up beside Fawnfreckle as if he was trying to consume the entire warmth of her body, shivering uncontrollably as he did so. His mentor didn't even look at him, not being able to bring herself to see the mess Ravendusk could only imagine she felt blame for.

"I can't watch this." Irisfrost muttered, his tabby tail flicking painfully as he dismissed himself, but a sudden gasp from the tomcat made them all shift around to see him being towered over by Foxglove, one of the head combatants.

"Foxglove, why are you here?" Cove didn't waste a single second in questioning the dilute tomcat who's eyes only grazed over everyone assembled before him.

"Ares is ready for their initiation into the point. The four older ones, that is." He explained, and Ravendusk felt his entire body freeze as he met his mate's gaze in shared worry.

"Usually they're given days in advance to prepare, there's no way." Cove reasoned, but the head combatant didn't falter, so she insisted on having a few moments with the group before they were escorted to Chasm's Calling. He reluctantly agreed and waited outside.

"I thought we were already apart of the point, what does he mean initiation?" Frostfall queried, her claws sheathing and unsheathing nervously.

"It's a fight for everyone to watch. Any new members not born into the point must spar against existing members. Everyone finds entertainment in the whole thing."

"So we're basically being used for show?" Ravendusk prompted flatly and the calico just nodded her head.

"It's not personal." Cove tried to soothe, but urgency took over. "Listen, you all need to preform at the *best* of your ability, because how well you do out there will signify how cats in the point treat

you going forward. That can alter between life and death. You want cats on your side here, *trust me."* Cove instructed, and before Ravendusk had even the chance to question her further, Foxglove returned with other combatants who he'd never seen before. One forcefully dragged Fawnfreckle away from her apprentice as she hissed menacingly, pushing her towards Frostfall, Ravendusk and Irisfrost as the four of them were harshly guided to Chasm's Calling.

As they arrived, Ravendusk's eyes widened in shock, taking in the sights all around him as he was led deeper into the pit while cats everywhere began chanting, their voices blended together in an uproar he couldn't quite make out.

Frostfall brushed beside him and he could feel her heartbeat which beat just as rapidly as his own. They looked at each other with something he couldn't quite make out, but it didn't comfort him, if that was what they were even going for.

"Cats of Central Point." A booming voice echoed, dancing against the walls as it silenced the elated screams erupting from the cats watching above. Ravendusk looked around frantically, trying to find Cove in the crowd but it was no use.

"Today we watch in commemoration of our four newest additions as they prove their skills to us in an act to be initiated as official combatants into the point." Ares spoke each word callously slow, a type of conspiring beguile tainting his eccentric voice.

As he spoke, the point fell into an even more ear-splitting uproar. Ravendusk pinned his ears which began to ring from the intensity of it all. He was overstimulated and it was making it hard to focus on anything, which only made him panic more.

Ares's callous blue gaze drifted over his raving followers, soaking up in their excitement before he looked at the four newcomers, head tilting in a way that made the black warrior shudder.

"Fawnfreckle." He spoke, all agog-like. Ravendusk immediately looked to his tabby friend, watching her every move as she flicked an ear to acknowledge the monarch calling her. She looked tired. Defeated. But she stepped forward, face completely impassive.

Ares circled her, examining her curiously before pausing and looking to his head combatants, a knowing look glimmering within heartless blue eyes.

"*Zephyr."* He spoke, drawing out his voice as the point gasped and began chatting eagerly amongst each other in anticipation. Ravendusk could feel his heart drop. Cove had mentioned that Zephyr was one of Central Point's most lethal combatants, besides her father and Sybil that is.

Fawnfreckle was the most skilled in combat out of the four of them and she'd always been a great strategist during fights, but he still wasn't sure she could beat *him.* Not only was he described as ruthless and talented in his own right, but she was in a very addled state.

Zephyr stepped forward, face-to-face with the tabby she-cat as he stared down tauntingly at her. If she was threatened, she didn't show it, but she'd always had a gift for portraying herself as fearless.

"The winner must be able to keep their opponent immobile until the time is up and whatever it takes to get there relies solely on the two of you. You may begin." Ares explained, each word just as distinguished as the next.

Ravendusk could hardly feel Frostfall brushing against his side as the fight began, wanting more than anything to break away from her, but that was unfair. So he stood, uncomfortably, as he watched Fawnfreckle, praying to StarClan over and over to keep his friend safe.

Zephyr slashed his brindled tail back-and-fourth challengingly, but his tabby rival did not react. She never had been one to play before a fight, always wanting to cut straight to the chase. This seemed to annoy the head combatant, so he jumped straight into action, which Ravendusk found stupid. Perhaps he thought this was an easy win, so strategy wasn't needed, but he was heavily underestimating the tabby.

She immediately dodged his attack like Ravendusk knew she would,

and in Zephyr's sheer shock at her ability to calculate his move, she took the time to attack, planting her claws into his back and digging in. It was brutal. Spars were never like this back home. Even during gatherings when the clans would fight for fun, the main rule had always been to go at it with sheathed claws. Those same rules did not apply here.

The head combatant snarled deafeningly as he flung onto his hindquarters and fell backwards, crushing her underneath his weight. She yelped painfully, her claws scrambling to dig into the ground, but this wasn't the forest. The turf beneath them was much more resilient. Ravendusk could feel Frostfall tense beside him and he briefly looked at her, watching her pupils switch from each of the opposing cats attentively.

"What if he kills her?" Irisfrost whispered, not even hiding the panic in his voice as he watched his sister.

"That's not how it works, you heard Ares." Ravendusk reasoned.

"You really think he cares if she's killed? All he wants is a show, *and that* would be a show." Frostfall snapped, and he struggled to look at Irisfrost.

"Fawn's strong, she's got this." He spoke quietly in a weak attempt at comforting his friend, but the striped tomcat beside him didn't seem eased at all.

Fawnfreckle had been able to remove herself from beneath her competitor during their talk and now the two were sending nasty attacks back and fourth, drenching each other in their opponent's blood.

She began to back up, a fearful look shining vividly on her face which Ravendusk immediately found to be odd. She never allowed herself to appear scared. *Never.* Zephyr's own face began to shine complacently, and as he slowly approached her in an attempt to slow down his victory and really soak in it, the fearful look on her face bled into something to mirror his own and with Zephyr's guard down, she used every ounce of energy she had to pounce, the two rolling in a fury of claws and teeth. The only difference is she was

expecting it, and he was not.

She ended up with him beneath her, broad shoulders pressing into his own as she dug her claws in as deep as she could. Ravendusk was sure she had to be meeting the bone.

An anguished yowl split the air, seconds passed but it felt so much longer. Her yellow eyes were shining wickedly now and she aggressively shoved her shoulders down again despite already having the upper paw. Ravendusk perked up, and alas, Ares intervened and Fawnfreckle was victorious.

He was jaw-dropped. They all were. The point fell into a frenzy of yowls, chanting her name and looking at each other with shocked glances. No one had expected her to win. Ravendusk didn't even expect her to win.

He supposed her luck had yet to fail her.

"Zephyr, seems like you finally have some competition." Ares teased as the head combatant hissed in frustration, glaring menacingly at Fawnfreckle who just stared back at him blankly. Usually she'd be gloating her tail off, but even her spirit was growing tainted by the point.

"You won't be so lucky next time." Zephyr snarled before he limped away, blood seeping from the wounds in both of his shoulders. His striped rival didn't react as she watched him with an unreadable look.

Ares dismissed her and in her absence, called upon Irisfrost.

"Put your pride aside. Lose if you have to. It's not worth your life." Fawnfreckle quickly whispered to her brother as they passed each other and he just nodded faintly.

"You okay?" Ravendusk questioned as he gazed upon his bloodied friend but she didn't respond. He didn't question her further.

Irisfrost was paired against a lithe gray-spotted she-cat, Amaryllis. At first glance, she appeared like an easy win, but Ravendusk quickly learned he was wrong in that assumption. The little she-cat

was cunning, moving so quickly that Irisfrost could hardly keep up with her.

Every attack he sent she was crafty at avoiding, sending her own calculated attacks in each of his failed ones.

He never stood a chance.

Amaryllis was victorious and the difference between the way the point celebrated Fawnfreckle's win and condemned his defeat was uncanny. They spat on him and spewed words of revile. As he returned back to the four of them, his sister just placed her tail on his shoulder in a small but noticed attempt at comforting him.

Ares flicked his tail in an order to silence the point and allowed their voices to hush. Once they were, his gaze danced around the mass of cats before they settled on two tomcats. The monarch didn't have to say a word as the two of them were already approaching the centre of the pit.

"Frostfall. Ravendusk. Join me."

The mated pair shared a nervous stare until nodding together, looking forward as they joined the others together.

"These are my sons, Glade and Crow. This will be a fight with the both of you going against the two of them. Same rules apply."

Ravendusk took in the two brothers before him, using the little time he had left to examine them. One of them, Glade, resembled him closely by having black fur, white markings and green eyes while the other, Crow, was completely covered in sable fur.  They appeared quite young, younger than Cove and Sybil, and Rave briefly wondered why the calico had never mentioned them.

Being so entranced in thought, he never heard Ares call for the fight to begin so Ravendusk was caught completely off-guard as one of them, Crow, quickly launched himself towards the warrior. Next thing he knew he was eating dirt, the piercing of claws making his whole body soar with adrenaline as they stretched down his back. He quickly caught sight of Frostfall taking on Glade but wasn't left

much time to tell how well she was doing as another attack was sent towards him. He was annoyed now, blindly sending out an unsheathed paw to his opponent's face and praying it hit. It did, to his luck.

Crow backtracked slightly, shaking away blood but Ravendusk just sent another. And another. And another. He had so much pent up anger and he was beginning to feel the wrath of it.

Gaining confidence from his sudden boost of accurate attacks, he grew bolder as he sent another blow to the ebony brother's chest, claws curling as he did so and ripping flesh. His rival stumbled back and at this, Ravendusk leapt off his back legs and pressed his body to the other tomcat, knocking him off his paws and crushing his neck. He could feel Crow struggling to breathe and in his moment of triumph, he saw his mate paralleled in the same position, however she was the one being pinned.

"That's enough." Ares called out and Ravendusk contemplated in just killing the tomcat instead as some kind of revenge against the monarch. But that wasn't who he was, so he released him.

He watched the two brothers join together, contrasting each other as they did. Crow looked down at his paws, not once meeting his father's gaze, while Glade appeared more than pleased with himself. Ravendusk didn't even care to listen to the mixed response from the cats watching anymore, finding this dynamic much more interesting to observe.

"This was meant to be a team effort, but I find this outcome far more entertaining." Ares countered, approaching his two sons. He pushed his defeated son away and then nudged his conquering one to Ravendusk, a well pleased grin plastered to his face.

"I find the only way to settle this is through one last fight; vanquish against vanquish."

Ravendusk wasn't opposed to this idea, either. Looking at his beaten mate only furthered this drive, and as soon as he was given the okay, he was immediately going for the attack. To his surprise, Glade was much quicker than his brother, and dodged the attack.

Rave could feel himself growing irked, losing his tact as he allowed his rage to take over. Glade was far more composed, and every missed attack was followed by a deliberate strike of his own, and he wasn't nearly as messy. Though Ravendusk was able to hold his own for awhile, he eventually grew strained, each blow growing weaker and weaker until eventually, he was being pinned.

It happened so fast and he couldn't see see straight anymore, recoiling as he was condemned in the same way Irisfrost was. Once Glade was called victorious, the warrior didn't have it in him to get himself up, just taking the insults from the cats who watched his dereliction.

"Get up, you look weak." He heard Fawnfreckle whisper in his ear, only for them to hear, but she wasn't deprecating him like the others were. She was looking out for him, he knew that, but he couldn't bring himself to stand until she was forcibly dragging him up by his scruff.

The two joined back up with Frostfall and Irisfrost, none of them having it in themselves to be of comfort to the other as they drowned in their own dread.

# chapter 8

Days had passed since their so-called initiation. Ravendusk wanted to laugh every time someone referred to it as such, but not because it was funny. Far from it. Maybe ironic wasn't the right word, but something close to it. They were branded since then, Ares clawing some marking to their chest that appeared to be something similar to a crescent moon. *Cryptic,* was his only thought, and it was more condescending than anything else. Cressida had said it was because the point was so large and nobody cared to know everyone, and if there wasn't some kind of mark signifying Central Point, then anyone could come in and no one would even bat an eye.

The point had grown to like Fawnfreckle, cats higher up in the hierarchy finally paying notice to her and inviting her onto their informal meetings, or hangouts. He supposed that kind of respect and admiration was to be expected when you beat a highly skilled cat in combat, and seeing how this place operated, everyone wanted to be affiliated with anyone who they deemed in high regard. The tabby was dismissive to them at first, but Cove advised her to play along, so she did. Reluctantly. Sometimes Ravendusk thought it was a front she put on when she acted disinterested. If it were him, he would revel in the acclaim, but he'd hide that part of him too. Despite his better judgement, he couldn't help but think everyone operated the same as him.

As he went about his day, he was wary of the amount of guards everywhere he went, seemingly tripled in amount. He hadn't heard much about their so-called rivals since those kits had been stolen, and surely they would've retaliated by now, but a lot of time passed and nothing happened. So why were their more guards now? Seemed random.

He was heading towards the medic's quarter, but not for himself despite the still fresh wounds from his spar against the two brothers only days prior. He was going to finally check on Cloudpaw, being the only one out of his friends to not have seen him since the day of

the initiation. Truth be told, he wasn't sure he was strong enough to stomach what it may look like. Ever since losing his sister, he couldn't tell if he'd grown more sensitive to bad things, or just entirely numb to them. It really depended on the day.

He crouched through the tunnel, green eyes surveying his surroundings until they landed on Fawnfreckle and Cloudpaw. They seemed to be the only ones present despite Lily, Sage and a few other medics who were organizing their stash of unfamiliar herbs.

As he approached them, Fawnfreckle greeted him with an excited expression as she quickly stood to her paws, waving her tail as Cloudpaw followed suit, immediately shocking him.

"Rave, I beat the odds!" The little white cat purred, and although he seemed thinner than he should be, the wounds had shrunk in size and his eyes beamed like they had before.

"Never doubted you couldn't, whatever would we do without your brain?" Ravendusk mimicked his excitement, relieved he wouldn't have had to deal with the repercussions that would've followed had the apprentice not made it.

"You'd all be lost, that's for sure." Cloudpaw spoke matter-of-factly, and although he lightly shook from malnutrition, he seemed to be back in high spirits. Ravendusk slightly envied his enthusiasm, then cursed himself so.

"Really," a foreign voice softly whispered, "it is a miracle." Ravendusk found himself staring, dumbfounded, at Sage as she spoke. He and Fawnfreckle shared an uncertain glance, remembering what Cove had told them about medics and their right, or lack of, to speak.

"I've never seen someone so far gone come back from an illness like that." Lily added, joining her counterpart so only the warriors could hear them.

"Are you..." Fawnfreckle trailed off, not necessarily sure what else to say in what he could only assume as fear of saying the wrong thing or insulting them in some way.

"I trust you." Sage answered, calming their worries slightly as they all looked at each other. Ravendusk pitied the medics, he truly did. They were treated as less than dirt and he watched the way they were abused by the cats in the point, cats who they had been helping. It was sick and unfamiliar to him.

"It's hard to see the light in a place so dark, but sometimes that spark can be lit. Brings hope, I guess. We all thrive off of it. Seeing your little friend heal was something we silently celebrated." Lily explained, however something sad lingered beneath green eyes.

"Glad I could be of service." Cloudpaw boasted, but his mentor slapped him with her tail. The two medics didn't seem hurt by his act of conceit as they quietly laughed.

"I don't mean to be insensitive," Fawnfreckle started hesitantly and Ravendusk couldn't help but hold his breath, "but how do you live like this? I think I'd off myself if I was treated like I was... was..."

"Inferior." Sage answered for her, and Fawnfreckle just nodded slowly, her ecru gaze seeming to look for any kind of understanding in the green eyes of the other tabby.

"Hope." Lily answered for her, redefining what she had said earlier. "It's the beating heart."

Ravendusk just stared at her, taking her words in and shaming himself in turn, which just made him even more angry. His sister died and he lost meaning in himself. In life. These cats were tortured every single day and yet they still had faith.

"We take care of each other, too. Words say so little in comparison to actions." Sage explained, nudging her friend gently which resulted in a small smile from her. "I believe every life has meaning to this world, and I think we have to make the most of whatever our own destiny is. I have to believe that some good will come from me. From us."

"And it did. You saved my life." Cloudpaw thanked, sincerely, his blue eyes shining passionately. "I owe you both."

"Nonsense, we were happy to. You helped us just as much as we helped you." Lily reassured.

"You're both stronger than I could ever be. You deserve a lot better than this, I never realized the world and cats in it could be so cruel." Fawnfreckle whispered, her eyes locked on her paws, displaying a type of vulnerability Ravendusk had never seen from her. He agreed, though. He could never live like this.

"Oh hush, you are much stronger than you give yourself credit for. News travels fast, we heard your defeat over Zephyr. *No one* has ever done that." Sage comforted and Fawnfreckle met her gaze, eyes nearly glossy. "Was very satisfying to hear he got his tail handed to him."

"It was just survival instincts."

"You were the only one to win, Fawn. They're right, give yourself some credit." Ravendusk spoke, brushing his thin tail over his friend in an act of gentle tribute.

"Whenever we leave this place, we'll bring you with us. I promise." Fawnfreckle vowed, but the black tomcat winced at that. Escaping seemed impossible, and making promises that were weak wasn't good for anyone.

Sage was about to respond, but was quickly hushed as some other point cat entered the quarter, complaining about a sore throat, so she just offered a faint nod and went off to tend to him.

~~~

Ravendusk watched as Cloudpaw played around with a blooming flower in the garden, finally putting on weight. Fawnfreckle was able to feed him on her own, not having to rely on Cove to bring her prey anymore with her new status.

"It really is amazing, I was sure he was dead when I last saw him." Cove commented flatly as she watched him.

"I hate to admit it, but so was I." Ravendusk confessed, redirecting his gaze to the calico and she met his in return. "I think we all
~~~

were."

"You all need to have some faith." Cressida spoke lightheartedly, tail flicking.

"Very rich coming from you." Cove teased.

"I have you beat when it comes to optimism." The ashen white feline countered, an unfamiliar edge coating her voice. It was nice to see her coming out of her shell.

"Cloudpaw might give you a run for that. He's all enlightened now, and treating him like some walking miracle isn't helping his ego." Ravendusk quietly responded, eyeing the apprentice to make sure he didn't hear.

"That's good, having that kind of mentality is an asset here." Cressida defended, curling her gray-tipped tail around her small paws as a short silence fell upon them, finally being broken by Cove.

"Where are the others?"

"Irisfrost and Frostfall were called to some scavenge and Fawnfreckle was invited to a party of sorts. Crazy how fast the dynamic shifted with her." Ravendusk answered more enviously than he had hoped.

"Everyone here is shallow, that's why. Strength gets you far in the point, any other virtue is disregarded." Cressida added.

"Brute force can't be the only thing holding this place together." Ravendusk countered. He could say all he wanted to about the point, but it was a flawless system. A flawed, yet also flawless system. Somehow, those two truths coexisted.

"Don't undermine the power of a narcissist and complying narcissists." Cove hissed, clawing a line in the dirt.

"I'm surprised this place functions as well as it does," Ravendusk started, "I mean, there doesn't appear to be a set point of rules, and yet everyone complies anyways."

"Fear." Cressida answered shortly, something unrecognizable shifting in her gaze.

"It's just known. Listen, don't leave, stay out of cats' way and you should be fine. Disobey, and well, a lot of cats don't think the punishment is really worth it, and I agree."

"Punishment... as in death?"

"Sometimes." Cove shrugged. "Or declawed, lose your tongue, your tail, your loved ones. List goes on. Any violence which goes on between cats is just ignored, unless someone more 'important' is involved."

"Punishments from my home were basically just pulling ticks out of the elders' fur or changing out their nest. As an apprentice I used to *hate* it, but now I couldn't wish for something more."

"That sounds like a breeze." Cressida spoke, meeting his green eyes quickly as she did. "Not to downplay your struggles, or anything."

"Trust me, compared to this place, it was." He confirmed, tail flicking lightly as another questioned bubbled in his head. "Why are there so many more guards than usual?"

"A patrol picked up on Stone Height scents; fresh. Must've been a lookout party, probably planning an attack since we stole their kits. They didn't react too kindly the last time, so I wouldn't assume they'd fair to it this time." Cove explained and he quickly noticed the way Cressida faintly shuddered, blinking several times as if to rid herself of a bad memory.

He debated on questioning it, but he didn't get the chance to as someone appeared, garnering his attention.

It was a small she-cat, older than Cloudpaw but younger than them. She had light brown fur with white markings on her chest and front legs and green eyes.

"Holo." Cove exclaimed, standing up to meet the newcomer who had greeted Cloudpaw fondly. *They must have met already.* The calico turned to face Ravenduck again. "This is my little sister."

"Cove has said so much about you all." Holo confessed, resulting in an embarrassed shift from her calico sister. She must be littermates with Glade and Crow. Ravendusk briefly wondered who Cove's mother was, but he didn't have much time to settle on that thought.

"She said you all have weird names like Cloudpaw." She grinned.

"Hey! My name is only temporary until I become a warrior. I'll probably be called Cloudclaw, or Cloudstrike, or Cloudthunder. Something cool, I know that for sure." He defended, but she just giggled.

"And all equally as weird."

"Be nice." Cove scolded.

"Don't be hypocritical." Ravendusk pressed. "Wasn't it you who called them, verbatim, dignity-killing names?"

"Touché." Cove fessed.

"I like them." Cressida commented nonchalantly.

"Thank you!" He exclaimed as they all fell into collective laughter, enjoying each other's presence. It was nice to be able to forget about the circumstances they were in, even if it was only temporary, however the moment was cut short as a distant yowl broke the air.

He looked around, confused, but quickly gathered it couldn't be good by the looks of fear which danced around each of their eyes.

"Cress, take Holo and Cloudpaw to the shelters." The calico quickly instructed, her once tranquil demeanor shifting into something much more urgent.

"What's going on?" Cloudpaw quickly asked, looking around frantically. Ravendusk quickly placed his tail on the apprentice's shoulder. "It's okay, just go with her. You'll be fine."

"I want Fawnfreckle!" The little feline pleaded unrelentingly.

"I'll find her, I promise. Just go." Ravendusk vowed, and finally the apprentice nodded and followed Cressida and Holo. The black tomcat quickly looked at Cove when it was just the two of them. "What was that?"

"The battle cry," she spoke quietly, "we're under attack."

。˚•□ɘ♡ɐ□•˚。

It's been awhile since I've updated this and to be honest, this summer has been a busy one for me. Also been going through a few things mentally. Also!! For whatever reason, I reworked this entire story and I'm taking a very huge leap into unknown territory and going at it blind. This could be a horrible idea but time will tell, the chaos is fun at least.

One thing I did change— Rancor is getting a name change to Stone Height. I personally like it better and it feels less in your face??

I still have eight chapters written and I'll try to get them out. Should I just put them all out at once or space it out?

There's so much story I want to tell and so many characters I want to dive into, I have to remind myself to not neglect the mains. Also, this AN is all over the place lmao. Just one of those days

Anyways!! Thanks for reading!! You guys are what brings me back and makes this fun. <3

# chapter 9

Many moons ago, Ravendusk had a different view of war. On battle. Something about it brought a kind of thrill he relished in. Honor. Something to fight for, something to earn. A loyalty to prove to those who raised you and made you everything you are.

Then Frostfall's parents died, and he watched. She did, too. There was nothing honorable about that. They didn't need to die.

Aloepetal was next. He didn't watch her die, but he saw her body. Taunting him. Still to this day, she haunted his dreams. He used to despise her when she was alive for being so naive, and he still despised her when she died for leaving him so screwed up.

War felt tactless after that.

Ravendusk frantically followed Cove through the tunnels of Central Point, joining in with another frenzy of rushing cats who pushed past him, their eyes shining eagerly for the battle that was rising. Time felt slowed as he looked around, the awful noise of their extended claws against the bare floor forcing his ears down.

They made it to The Quarter where cats swarmed around Ares who stood broadly, his eyes absolutely void of life as he watched them all, his tongue curling around his teeth. The monarch's eyes locked to the sharpened crystalline stare of his oldest daughter, Sybil.

"Rave." A raspy voice greeted and the sable feline twisted around to meet worried yellow eyes, sighing a breath of relief as he saw Fawnfreckle. "What's going on? Amaryllis said something about an attack. Where's Cloudpaw?"

"Cressida took him somewhere where he'll be safe." He swiftly reassured, trying to steady his breath. "Where's Frostfall?"

"I'm here." The delicate voice of his mate soothed, and he quickly embraced her before stepping back to allow her more time to speak.

"When me and Irisfrost where on that scavenge, we saw them. Rave, there's so many of them."

"Look around, we're not so low in numbers ourself." Cove commented, and as she did, everyone took in the sights around them. Cats were flooding from every corner, they seemed limitless. He knew the point was big, but it had never been put to scale like this. There had to be at least a few hundred of them.

"Where's my brother?" Fawnfreckle queried.

"Foxglove instructed him and a few others to get the stolen kits and hide them. He should be fine." Frostfall answered.

"Cats of Central Point," Ares's resonant voice boomed as he hushed the mix of voices, "soon Stone Height will be bleeding through, and I want to remind everyone that resources grow scarce when things grow past sustainability. There is only so much room before our lifeline is compromised. Today you fight with honor to protect the home that has gifted you so much prosperity."

It took *everything* in Ravendusk not to scowl. Honor? What about any of this was honorable? These cats weren't attacking as a form of protecting their homeland or their resources, they were attacking because their youth were violently and savagely stolen from their mothers when they were most vulnerable. For what reason? He had no clue. Not at all. Perhaps sustainability wouldn't be so compromised if more mounts to feed weren't stolen.

"I have never seen so many brainwashed cats. Pathetic." Fawnfreckle hissed under her breath, preparing herself for a battle none of them had any business being in, fighting for a cause none of them believed in.

But what choice did they have?

Foreign scents brushed at Ravendusk's nose and he felt his entire body stiffen. He lost his drive moons ago when his sister died, and it never returned. He wanted to go home so bad, but that wasn't an option. He wasn't the cat he used to be.

He wasn't as strong as he used to be.

Suddenly cats began bleeding from every opening of the quarter and chaos broke fourth, yowls and animosity-fueled swears dancing around the towering quarter. He and his friends watched for a stunted moment, seeing as cats tore through each other without a single bit of mercy. None of it had any merit whatsoever. At least the clans held a bit of nobility during war, but this place lacked any of it.

Suddenly a black she-cat approached him, her chest void of the crescent marking all point cats adorned. She snarled, showcasing a pair of sharp and intimating white teeth. Her tail lashed back and fourth, a menacing glare gyrating behind her slitted yellow eyes. She showed an anger foreign to him. She didn't gleam with high pride or a seek for thrill. She was only full of fury.

Ravendusk had a thousand thoughts running through his head, colliding together in a way that was intelligible, so he relied solely on reflex. He hissed in return, baring his teeth and mimicking the slanted move of her eyes, extending his claws to the point it hurt. The lithe black she-cat before him seemed *almost* impressed by his swift change of appearance.

They circled each other, both faking an attack in an attempt to goad at their opponent. Once he figured it had gone on long enough, Ravendusk hurled himself towards her, claws extending for her eyes. He was pleased to find her stunted by this choice of attack. Going for the eyes in a battle back with the clans was heavily looked down upon. Those battles *usually* weren't for kill. But here, he was free to do whatever he needed to ensure he survived.

In her moment of surprise, his claws dug into her eyes and she yowled in what he could only imagine as pure agony. He winced at the feeling of it, curling his ears downward and forcing his eyes shut. He felt her buckle beneath him and he ripped them out, the warmth of her blood coating his white-tipped paws.

He opened his eyes, ears reaching his skull as he watched her stagger backwards, screaming over and over. "I can't see! I can't see!"

What happened next left the tomcat completely stunned as another feline from Stone Height caught on. The new height tomcat approached the newly-blinded she-cat and slit her throat, leaving her to fall limply to the ground as he seemed to say some kind of prayer. It was then that it dawned upon Ravendusk that it was a mercy kill.

This new tomcat looked at her with a look that appeared to be apologetic before redirecting his gaze towards Ravendusk, a rage taking over his once desolate gaze.

He didn't waste a single second as he flung himself towards the black tomcat, pressing his large paws on his neck. Ravendusk struggled under the pressure, making horrid gagging noises as he weakly tried to claw at his rival's throat, but to no avail. He could feel his adrenaline running through every part of him, his blood roaring in his ears while his widened and bloodshot green eyes looked around for anyone to help him, but he could feel his vision blurring. He was dying. This was it.

Ravendusk closed his eyes, trying to calm his panicking mind but he knew there was no use. He wanted to go home. He wanted to see his mom. His dad. He wasn't ready. Not yet.

Suddenly the pressure released and he shot up, his chest heaving as he desperately regained breath. He bowed over his hunched shoulders before he weakly looked up to see Frostfall standing over his opponent's now dead body, her once solid white fur drenched in his blood.

"Thank you." He heaved and she just nodded lightly, looking down at her victim with a look he couldn't quite make out.

That was the first time she killed another cat. That was the first time a life became nothing because of her.

He would probably have her same fate, too. In the war with the clans, where all four where involved, cats had died. But that wasn't normal. It didn't happen like that usually, it wasn't supposed to, but repercussions followed to make sure it would never happen again.

This was different.

Ravendusk looked around, finally taking in the nauseating smell of blood as bodies lay all around him, mangled and punctured beyond repair. Some seemed younger than warrior-aged cats. Some didn't look much older than Cloudpaw. He didn't realize he had let out a gutted cry until Frostfall was beside him, her bloodied nose nudging his cheek.

"Snap out of it, now is not the time." She whispered breathlessly and he met her deepened blue eyes, nodding with her. *Now is not the time,* he reminded himself.

The pair looked around, both focusing on a much older cat from the point terrorizing a younger cat from Stone Height. He was torturing the poor thing.

"*Frost."* He strained, his breath growing hitched.

"They're the enemy, there's nothing we can do." She answered, her fragile voice sounding defeated. However both of them were left in astonishment as Fawnfreckle flung herself towards the cat from Central Point. Ravendusk felt his entire body grow rigid, half of him pleased the younger cat was spared, the other half terrified for what this meant for his tabby friend.

"Did anyone else see that?" Frostfall asked, though he didn't respond at first. He didn't know.

"She's gonna have to kill him," he paused, "too much of a liability. I don't even want to think what would happen if Ares found out."

He was stressed beyond belief, watching as Fawnfreckle and the point cat fought like savages. Her face shone with something completely untamed and terrifying and Ravendusk couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief as she finally killed him after a lengthy struggle, not taking a moment to view her win as she stealthily moved back into the crowd of fighting cats.

"I don't think anyone saw." He spoke, clinging onto his words for hope.

"That Stone Height cat did." His mate argued, but he shook his head.

"Fawn saved his life. He won't say anything."

Ravendusk watched as another cat from the height caught up with the younger one, making immediate eye contact with Frostfall and himself. The four just stared at each other, and he prepared to attack, but the older cat from their rival group just dipped his head ever-so-faintly before nudging the younger one away.

He looked to his mate, so many silent conversations going on within their agitated stares until their moment was interrupted and they were attacked by a new duo of height cats.

Ravendusk rolled around with his newfound adversary, hissing as he felt claws dig into his shoulders as he tried to wriggle out of their grasp, looking up in frustration as he swiped his claws against their chest. It was another tomcat, and to his satisfaction, he recoiled a bit to his attack. It gave Ravendusk another chance at curling his claws at his ear, digging them in and pulling his opponent to the ground as he dragged him. The other feline fell free as half of his ear detached and hung from Ravendusk's drenched claws. He allowed himself one moment to look at it before discarding it, forcing the pain in his shoulders away as restless eyes met restless eyes.

He flung himself towards the other feline, a dark brown tabby, as the two sent calculated blows back and fourth. The tabby ducked, hissing as he sent his claws at Ravendusk's lower chest, but he was growing galled now. The sable-hued feline leaped over his competitor before hurling himself on his back, claws digging in deep into his shoulder blades. The tabby roared up onto his hind legs, but Rave just sunk his claws in deeper. With the tabby's stomach vulnerable, Ravendusk watched as Frostfall freed herself from her own opponent to tear her claws down the tabby's exposed stomach. Watching the life drain from his eyes wasn't satisfying.

Sometimes Ravendusk thought the universe's ability to keep him alive was something bred entirely from spite.

Before his counterpart could attack, a retreat yowl broke into the air and screams bled away into a ghastly silence as their enemy fled. They scrambled over dead bodies before disappearing back into the depths they emerged from.

Once they were mainly gone, he quickly looked around to make sure everyone was accounted for. Frostfall was beside him, heaving and bloodied, but he was sure it was mainly the blood of others. He spotted Fawnfreckle aways down, stood alongside Amaryllis. She had a nasty wound running from her shoulder to her lower back, but she was alive and standing.

He frantically looked through the battered cats of Central Point, trying to find one particular calico. He nearly panicked until his gaze landed on Cove near the wall. She was alive.

Everyone was okay. Everyone that he cared about, that is.

Ravendusk felt Frostfall melt into him and he welcomed her touch despite feeling disgusted with himself, but he was in no mood to deny her. It was the least he could do with everything she had done for him.

The sable tomcat looked at all the bloodied cats from the point, some crying out in pain or in loss, before his eyes danced over the lifeless bodies splattered everywhere.

Yet the most abhorring sight wasn't any of that.

It was Ares, absolutely untouched, who just watched it all happen without an ounce of remorse for the bloodbath he had caused.

# chapter 10

*Something's gotten into you.*
*You don't really look at me the way*
*you used to.*

。˚ •□ɔ♡e□•˚ 。

The walk back from the quarter left the four drowning in an unknowing yet shared bind, scarred and tainted by the claws of their marked rival, cats Ravendusk had grown to view differently. They were refused the right to get treated, others had it worse supposedly, but the piercing and clearly open wound on his shoulder begged to differ. His three counterparts weren't holding too well, either. But none of them said anything. He wasn't sure there was much to say.

He and Frostfall would garner a few brief glances before letting both their eyes narrow on Fawnfreckle, who hung in the back, before they'd look at each other knowingly, silently hoping in shared camaraderie that their tabby friend's betrayal to the point had went unnoticed to anyone but themselves. His mate appeared trouble, as if it held everything in her not to lash out at the striped warrior, but the less anyone knew, the better. He hoped— *prayed*— she knew that.

Once Cove led them into the garden, they were warmly greeted by Cressida, Irisfrost, Holo and Cloudpaw until their four untouched friends took in the damaged state of the others. It made Ravendusk feel pitied as Irisfrost tried to help, nagging and questioning until it felt suffocating. He just wanted to help, Rave knew that, but the feeling was all too familiar and all too irritating, so he gently reassured the darker tabby that he was okay. *Lies.*

Cloudpaw's blue eyes stared sadly down at Fawnfreckle who appeared noticeably troubled by the adversity of their situation, but the sable tomcat knew that physical pain wasn't the cause of her silent suffering.

"We won." Cressida broke the silence in something that almost sounded like a question. To his discomfort, it made Frostfall scoff. Luckily, she remained silent as she drew a paw over her battered ear.

"Just survived." Cove muttered, her claw twirling around a flower bud as her eyes remained fixated on it. Her chest was rising and falling fast, however he wasn't sure if it was because the adrenaline hadn't calmed or because she was angry, but the vigor in her voice proved to be the latter. She had stated that her entire life had been built in a constant war zone and he was beginning to understand what that felt like.

"I want to go home." The dejected voice of Cloudpaw pleaded, and though the apprentice had said it to everyone, his eyes remained focused on his mentor. It was clear that he was searching for any kind of comfort she'd garner him, but she didn't meet his yearning stare.

In her absence, Frostfall gently nudged his cheek, offering him comforting whispers but he didn't seem eased. At this, Ravendusk caught Cove's gaze and was immediately shocked to notice the apologetic look which yieldingly said so much, even if words couldn't be heard. *I'm sorry my reality now belongs to you,* he assumed would be the words she was trying to speak with her eyes, but he didn't offer anything back but a blank expression.

Silence followed the group, uncomfortable and tender. The mixed sounds of hitched breathing and gentle jostling sounded louder than normal, the coherence of their new actuality absorbing any life they had left and leaving it for dust. Or so it seemed, at first.

"Frostfall." The encouraging voice of Irisfrost broke the tension as the white feline met his gaze, confusion evident from where she stood beside Cloudpaw.

"Would you rather have to listen to Paleflower's StarClan-awful singing everyday for twelve moons, or be assigned to apprentice duties for twelve moons?" As he finished his inquiry, everyone immediately began sharing looks of confusion.

"StarClan Iris, this isn't the time." Sighed Fawnfreckle in annoyance, but he was unyielding and Frostfall was quickly learning that she wasn't going to escape this.

"I," she paused hesitantly, "grew up listening to his *StarClan-awful singing*, so I'll have to go with that. I couldn't handle the shame of being a warrior doing apprentice tasks." She cautiously spoke, but once Irisfrost reacted in a surprised laugh, she relaxed.

"See," Iris purred, "this is the *perfect* time for this. Okay Frost, your turn."

Ravendusk watched as his mate kept her uncertain expression, but alas she sighed reluctantly and let her eyes dance around the assembled felines before landing on him. "Rave," she contemplated for a moment, "would you rather have to escape a dog-infested trap with Irisfrost or Fawnfreckle?" As soon as she asked her question, Irisfrost immediately leapt to his paws eagerly, tail lashing in curiosity as he waited for an answer, however his sister didn't seem quite as entertained as him as she remained blank in expression.

"Sorry, Iri. But gonna have to go with your sister, I'll need someone to defend me."

"Hey! Doesn't matter how good she is at fighting, against dogs, you're going to need strategy." Irisfrost argued, but he smiled ever-so-slightly when Fawnfreckle perked up at that.

"And I still have you beat there, brother."

"Alright then," Ravendusk finally settled down as he eyed his striped friend, "Fawn, would you rather-"

"This game is boring." Frostfall interrupted, not acknowledging the immediate scowl that came from the recipient who never got her question. Once silence followed, she continued. "Never have I ever claimed premature victory to *me* in a race, betting all the stars you'd win, before eating— quite literally— my dust."

"Oh come on!" Irisfrost whined, sitting back in protest. "You promised you'd never bring that up again." Cove and Cressida

shared a mused look and that was enough to wilt away any of the tabby's embarrassment as he realized he had successfully began to lift the mood.

"Oh! Oh!" Holo chirped, eyes blazing. "Never have I ever gave Crow catmint on 'accident' in front of Circe."

"Guilty." Cove shrugged, an unapologetic look in her eyes as Ravendusk looked at her curiously but she only offered a smug expression in response.

"He needed the humility." Cressida softly added as they all laughed and reminisced on a memory that was foreign to Ravendusk and his friends.

"Never have I ever believed the sky was actually falling the first time it rained." Fawnfreckle finally tagged along, thin voice complacent as she looked at her brother. She continued before he could respond. "Never have I ever believed fireflies were fallen stars."

"Okay I was like, four moons-"

"Never have I ever believed Frostfall when she said rabbits could fly because of their ears." Fawn cut him off, something challenging in her eyes but she quickly allowed him no chance at defense. "Never have I ever thought they were going crazy because everyone said the moon was green and *they believed it."*

"Okay okay! Now this is just unfair." Irisfrost groaned, flicking her shoulder but the grin he held on his face showed he wasn't offended by her remarks. "Not my fault that you were all pathological liars when we were younger."

"Not our fault you were so gullible!" Frostfall protested, but the twitch of her whiskers was proof enough that her insult was lighthearted.

Ravendusk watched as the group fell into a collective laughter and sighed at the warmth which cascaded through his body. The weight which had been clouding over him since they arrived seemed to

ease, even if it was temporary, but it was moments like these that made life a little more bearable.

~~~

The towering, sky-reaching twoleg dens seemed to expand until he could faintly see the toppling mountains of his home faded against the horizon. Ravendusk was perched upon a twoleg-crafted stone ledge which jutted out from one of the caverns inside Central Point's own desolate home, his green eyes void as he remained frozen in place. He wondered if his mother thought he was dead. He wondered if his clan was looking for them. He wondered if a vigil had been held for their assumed death.

"What are you thinking about?"

A gentle voice lulled softly in his ears which swiveled towards the pale white she-cat who had spoken them, but his gaze remained locked on his home which seemed so far away.

"Home."

Frostfall joined beside him and he could feel her blue eyes, unwavering, as she tried to read him. An uncomfortable silence fell, one the two were growing all too familiar with when it came to one another. He didn't want to look at her, even though he could hear her silently screaming at him, *look at me.*

"What about home?" She asked. Ravendusk had to control the scoff that bubbled at her question. It was a stupid question, he thought at least. His family, for one. His clan. The same thoughts he was positive she had as well.

He didn't answer her, almost forgetting she was there until he stiffened at her sigh of frustration beside him. He wanted her to leave, to allow him to just sit in his thoughts and self pity, however pathetic it may be. But he held his tongue.

"You were fine, yesterday. In the garden." A shift had switched with her tone, the delicacy fading into something much dryer. He batted her a single look. "What is it with me that makes you crumble away
~~~

into the shell of a cat you were back home? You were *laughing* with them, but when it's just me, you act like you hate me. I took care of you. I have been so patient and you give me nothing in return."

"I never asked you to take care of me. I never asked you to be patient. You can't keep throwing that in my face to make yourself feel better."

Frostfall laughed, but it wasn't one born of humor. It seemed more complacent than that. "I'm your mate, your partner, you didn't need to ask me. That's just a part of it. You lost your sister and you fell apart. I lost my parents and I was stuck coddling you because you couldn't handle it. So I had to handle it for you."

"I'm sorry you lost your parents, but I won't apologize for how I feel." Ravendusk could feel regret burning in his throat as he met her crystalline gaze. "You're just stronger than me. StarClan Frost, it's a compliment. Take the win. You don't need to coddle me anymore, I never wanted you too. I never wanted to hold you back. I knew you'd grow to resent me. And you have."

"*You* are the one who resents *me*!" Her voice sounded more like a shrill as she stood to her paws. "I stuck by your side. I just wish you'd look at me like you used to. Like you did when we were younger."

"Things changed, you just need to give me time."

"I have given *so much time.* Can you put someone else first, just once? Or is the cold shoulder only reserved for me? Because you seem completely okay with Fawn, or Iris, StarClan Rave you even seem better with Cove and you've just met her. You owe me!"

Ravendusk stared at her, watching the small tremble of her jaws, to the desperation in her eyes. For a moment he seemed to look at a younger version of her, youthful and idealistic, taking him to the gorge as they watched the starlight glimmer on the water's gentle wake below, before he saw her for who she was now. The same, but someone who carried *his* scars along with her own.

"You know I love you." He murmured, but she didn't seem

convinced. He did love her, so much. But everything he felt was incredibly numbed, including his love for her. Sure, he could laugh or find a fleeting moment of happiness, but it didn't erase the pain of everything else. He wished it was that easy.

"I love you too." She replied, her voice much calmer now. "It's not really the same thing, is it?"

He wasn't entirely sure what she meant by that and he wasn't given much time to falter on it as they were greeted by Fawnfreckle, the tabby's nose scrunching in disgust.

"Hey, do you smell that?" She queried, her yellow eyes dancing around to find the culprit. Ravendusk immediately left the lookout which viewed the entire city, silently thanking StarClan for giving him an out of the conversation. His mate joined him with Fawnfreckle as the trio followed the foul scent, an uncomfortable pit forming in his stomach as the smell of decaying flesh mixed with old blood stung his nose.

The formidable tension was broken with something much more grim as the three of them stumbled upon the slain bodies of Lily and Sage, their corpses surrounded by a circle of bones stained crimson with blood as flies swarmed their bodies.

Ravendusk made immediate eye contact with Fawnfreckle, the two sharing a knowing look. *Was this their fault? Did someone hear their conversation with the medics?*

It was his fault. Their death was his fault. And whoever killed them, wanted him to know that.

。˚ •□ɔ♡e□•˚ 。

*We talked about making it,*
*I'm sorry that you never made it.*
*And it pains me just to*
*hear you have to say it.*
*You knew the game and played it.*

# chapter 11

It was a thin promise, the one Fawnfreckle had made. Innocent enough but just as dangerous. He held her same dream; to bring Sage and Lily to salvation outside of Central Point. Bring them home to the clan where they'd be showered with respect and care, gentle and delicate, a place to heal the horrors they were born into.

As he lay curled up in the corner of Cove's residency, where he and his friends had found themselves occupying, he momentarily allowed himself to daydream of the scenario. He and his friends following the sun's guidance home, the smell of pine and marigold soothing their noses as they embraced their clanmates. Their families. As they told them about their endeavors and introduced them to the friends they had made. Reassuring the cats from the point that they were *finally* safe.

He opened his eyes as he comforted himself with his warmly-crafted dream, though dull walls harshly reminded him of the truth. He could still picture the small flickers of Sage's and Lily's lifeless eyes staring back at him as he winced and dug his nose into his paws. He extended his claws against the turf beneath him, cringing at the sound it made, trying to stimulate himself with anything physically uncomfortable to calm the war going on in his mind.

He stayed like that for days. He ignored the prey Cove left him, dully noticing the way she stayed absolutely silent as she went around catering to his needs. Then Frostfall would try to talk to him. At first she was gentle enough, but later she was beginning to sound the way she did when his sister died.

"*You didn't even know them. The way you are acting is ridiculous."*

*"You are never going to survive life if you can't handle death. It happens. Deal with it like the rest of us ."*

She didn't understand. It was his fault, and the only ones who did understand were Fawnfreckle and Cloudpaw. They had been there.

Cloudpaw wasn't there when the dead medics were discovered, though. Ravendusk wasn't even sure he knew, and that seemed to be the safest option. He wanted to preserve as much of the apprentice's innocence as possible, even when it felt impossible at times.

Fawnfreckle, he wasn't so sure. The tabby was never around anymore, always being dragged to parties and reserved gatherings with cats from the point who were deemed more prestigious. She acts like she hates it, that she's only doing it to gather intel and because Cove instructed her to play along, but he couldn't help but wonder if some part of her relished in the way cats treated her as more valuable all because she won a fight.

Irisfrost followed Cove and Cressida around like a lost puppy, all clueless and kit-like. He held himself without much structure these days, dazed and nervous. The dark tabby had never been low on self-esteem, in fact the pair of tabby siblings had always presented themselves confidently. Ravendusk didn't see that now, and he found it pathetic. Deep down, he understood why Irisfrost was acting the way he was. His sister was constantly unavailable, Frostfall was insufferable to be around and he... well, he was in no state to be a friend.

There had been a point where the four of them, before the war, were a group to be adored. Despite Frostfall's personal insecurity that festered itself within her trust in him, she was quite confident in herself. They all were. Even him, but that seemed like a lifetime ago.

He didn't really know who was was anymore. He couldn't tell you a single thing. What were his strengths? His weaknesses? What were the things he enjoyed? The things he hated? What were the little quirks— mannerisms— that crafted him uniquely from the rest? Who was he? Or really, *where did he go?*

He used to be lively; eccentric even. Extroverted and involved. Maybe a little tempered with youthful emotions, but even then he had always been someone who followed his mind and not his heart. At least that part of him still seemed to remain. He used to be able to defend himself and hold his own, but that part of him was dead

and gone, withered away like it had never existed.

He was sure of one thing, one characteristic, solely because it had been ingrained in him. He was selfish, and Frostfall *loved* to remind him of that fact. He didn't used to be, or at least he didn't think so. If old Ravendusk had been selfish, he wouldn't have put up with her endless claims of disloyalty and her insecurity, he wouldn't have spent countless tiresome days of reassuring her that she was it for him, he wouldn't have taken the fall for Fawnfreckle the day she had gotten them into a scuffle with WinterClan warriors all because she wanted to see the waterfall, he wouldn't have purposely lost to the spar against Irisfrost at their first gathering because his friend had been harassed by the other clan apprentices for being weak even though Rave would have easily beaten him.

Aloepetal.

There, he faltered.

"You stink." Pause. "No offense."

Ravendusk flicked a single ear, forest green eyes meeting a much lighter shade of green as Cove looked down at him, her expression soft but wounded all the same. *He hated that look. Pity. He was so sick of it.*

"None taken." He sounded harsher than he wanted to, but she clearly wasn't phased by it. Cove threw a dead pigeon in his direction, a demanding look catching his gaze as he looked from the bird back to her.

"Eat."

He debated arguing against her, but he didn't have it in him, so he ate even though every swallow got caught up in his throat and tried to bubble back up.

"What's your damage?"

Ravendusk removed his gaze from the carcass of his prey to meet her static gaze, taken back by the deadpan in her voice. She stared at him, unyielding and uncomfortably still. He knew what she was

asking and he would prefer arguing with Frostfall than have this conversation with her, and that was saying something. Truth be told, it felt shallow in comparison to her damage. But then again, Cove didn't strike him as one to compare trauma, and he was so sick of living in the mess that was his mind. Maybe he was so screwed because he felt like he had to figure it out on his own, and if that was the case, he'd just be angry at himself for prolonging his suffering all because he didn't want to ask for help. He thought for a moment, but with Cove staring unwaveringly at him, he finally sighed.

"A few moons ago," he began as he looked past her, gazing upon the opening of her den which overlooked the city, "my clan was in a four-way war with our rivals. I had a sister, Aloepetal. My mom always told me that she was my responsibility. Told me to look after her." He paused, a long exhale leaving his jaws. He closed his eyes momentarily as he let images of his sister fill his mind for the first time in moons. "She reminded me of a daisy, fragile and naive. Saw too much good in the world and failed to see the bad. She was never going to make it."

Cove stared at him as he met her eyes, trying to read whatever was going on in her head, but she didn't allow him that courtesy.

"You blame yourself?"

"Of course I do." He quickly answered. "I could have prevented it if I hadn't been so... so selfish." And there it was. *Selfish.*

"It was never your responsibility to be a parent."

"But it was my responsibility to be a brother."

"What happened to your sister was out of your control. You hear me?" She talked to him like he was a kit, as if she was teaching him some kind of lesson and she *needed* him to understand. "We lose in life. It just happens, and there's nothing anyone can do, there's no what if that can change the fate that the universe has planned. But *you*," she paused in a way that almost prompted embarrassment, but she let the vigor loosen in her voice as she softly whispered, "you are alive. That has to mean something."

Ravendusk looked at her and nearly lost himself in the conviction which stirred behind viridescent eyes, not even noticing the way he began to shake.

"Feel your pain, Ravendusk. Be angry. Be sad. Hate the world for a little bit. But don't push it away, because it will grow and grow and then crash. And it will be much harder to pick up the pieces when that happens."

"I just," he wanted to crumble away at the shake in his voice as he deepened his gaze on her, "I want to be feel like I used to. I want have something to look forward to. I want to-"

"To live again?"

"Yeah." He sighed. "I want to live again."

"It's good you're still alive then." She answered with near comedic delivery despite the grim atmosphere that surrounded them. "That's all you need, the rest is up to you. Nothing, not intelligence or strength or any virtue is as *powerful* as mentality. You can be happy again."

"It's really hard to do that here." Ravendusk murmured, awaiting for what she would say to that. To his surprise, she seemed lost as something shifted in her expression. But it was obvious. He was right, and she knew it. No one could truly know happiness in Central Point.

As silence settled, he looked past her to catch piercing blue eyes staring at them from the silhouette of a figure painted against city lights. Ravendusk sunk down as he realized Frostfall had heard the entire conversation.

~~~

The harrowing screech of monsters and swarm of twolegs reminded Ravendusk of their first night in the city, bringing memories that were far too unpleasant to reminisce on. The sable feline trailed behind Zephyr and his mob of assigned patrollers, which included him and unfortunately enough, Frostfall. He wasn't even sure what
~~~

the point of this particular mission was. Hunting? In a twoleg-invested empire? Patrol for scents of Stone Height? How could they ever do that with monster filth soaking the air?

Ravendusk grew to ignore the burning ground that scorched his paws. He was constantly batting his eyelashes as the sunlight burned in his eyes, but they didn't burn nearly as hot as his jaded mate's crystalline stare.

"Are you going to say something?" He finally asked, sighing in frustration as he met her deliberate eyes. "Or just act like I know what you want *me* to say? Because I'm not a mind reader."

"So you've told me." She quickly responded, venom lacing her voice.

"If you want me to console you about what you *think* you saw, all you have to do is ask." He grimly replied, slightly satisfied at the annoyed huff she responded with.

"You don't know what I think, but the fact that the first thing you *assume* I thought was that, is very telling Ravendusk." Frostfall whispered. He was stunned at her need for the dramatics, which was nothing new for Frostfall, but even she was breaking her own records.

"I didn't assume anything." He flatly responded, not giving her the satisfaction of a fueled answer. "You forget that I know you. Very well."

"We can *finally* agree on something. I do forget."

He stared at her for a moment, eyes tracing over her, darting from one eye to the other before resting on the slow sway of her tail. He didn't respond, so she spoke again in his place, though hushed to prevent other ears apart of their patrol from eavesdropping.

"You must understand how it looks to me when I try to get you to confide in me, your mate who has been there for you through *all of it,* but you turn me away just to tell all your problems to someone you've only just met. You don't ever talk to me about Aloepetal but the first time Cove asks, you spill all of it."

"I didn't need to tell you about her. You were there." He reminded, but his thoughts weren't as graceful. *Cove isn't as demeaning as you.*

"That's not what I meant, and you know it." Frostfall snapped, and she was right, he did know it.

"You know Rave," she paused, tongue pressing against her teeth as she tilted her head slightly, "no one will ever love you like I do. If it had been *anyone else* in my position in the aftermath of the war, you would've been left to rot and starve. You should be grateful."

Ravendusk bit his tongue at her words, forcing his gaze away as he stared at his stepping paws, going over her words. Was it true? No, he didn't think so. But it shouldn't be a thought. Despite how insufferable she could be, especially these last few moons, he still loved some part of her even if he couldn't find it anymore. It had to be there, somewhere, and he hoped he'd find it again.

"It's really hard to think about anyone like that right now, Frost. Given our circumstances." He started, his voice much softer than it had been. "But I chose you a long time ago. When we get home, I promise things will be different. But I can't think about anything personal like that when I'm scared all the time. We aren't safe here, that's all I can think about right now."

"The world is always cruel, Rave. We are never truly safe. Aloepetal is proof to that. *My parents*. We're meant to deal with it together!" She hissed, scraping away small twoleg scraps as she looked back to him. "And you met me before you knew her."

His anger began to burn again. He was so sick of his loyalty being viewed so thinly. He never did *anything* to garner this kind of treatment from her, because it started way before his sister died and it never ended. And here of all places! Their personal issues seemed so minuscule when all these horrible things crumbled around them. How can she think of *them* when in this dreaded situation. *Can I put her in her place? Am I allowed to do that? What a silly question. Of course I can.*

But he was scared to.

Ravendusk and Frostfall were taken out of their quiet quarrel as a louder argument sounded, both snapping their eyes up to see Zephyr snarling viciously at one of the trainees, Seed. He immediately recognized the lilac tabby as one of the three who had tormented Cloudpaw when they first arrived at the point.

"A pathetic waste of air is what you are!" Zephyr sneered, salvia spewing as he spoke. "You couldn't catch a rat if it was blind and on it's last leg."

"I'll do better." Seed spoke, almost pleadingly, a slight shake in his voice. Ravendusk could see the young tomcat was trying helplessly to hold it together.

"Like I haven't heard that before." The head combatant snickered, twisting away from the now trembling trainee before he twisted back around, an extended claw coming to meet Seed's face as the extreme force hurled the smaller cat into the thunderpath and a nauseating screech soared into the air, followed by the sound of cracking bones. Ravendusk and Frostfall both flinched, eyes widened in pure shock.

The other cats appointed to the patrol didn't seem phased at all. Ravendusk despised Seed for what he did to Cloudpaw, but he didn't deserve that.

The black tomcat looked to where Seed's now mangled and crushed body continued to get mutilated by each passing monster until he couldn't handle the horrible view anymore, something vile churning in his stomach as he looked to his mate's direction and saw her gutted expression.

*At least I don't have to confront Frostfall now.*

# chapter 12

*Fawnfreckle's POV*

。˚•□ɘ♡ɐ□•˚。

"When do you have to leave?" Murmured the soft voice of Cloudpaw who drew small pictures in the dust with his claw, blue eyes focused on his task but ears perked, awaiting her response.

Fawnfreckle watched for awhile, not registering his question for a few moments.

"Soon."

"I wish you could stay." He spoke quietly, sounding much younger than usual, like a kit would to their mother. It took her back a bit. Cloudpaw had always been independent. Wise beyond his years, or something like that. She hated it. Thought it to be annoying.

"I'll be back tonight. You'll be fine." She reassured, and he dropped the conversation but continued to draw little swirls in the dust. She continued to watch him, letting the time run until she had to leave. Ever since Cloudpaw had been appointed as her apprentice, she'd be unnecessarily mean to him. He didn't deserve it, and she knew that. But the world didn't care about deserve, so why should she?

Truth was, nothing scared her more than failure. Though she'd never admit it, she was terrified she'd fail him. Cloudpaw was smart. Smarter than she was at that age. StarClan, maybe even smarter than she was now. Her pride was a fragile thing.

Those feelings were beginning to fade, faintly, but they were. When Cloudpaw had somehow defied the odds and survived the poison which had infected his blood, she was filled with utter relief *and* love. Not the kind of love a warrior has for their apprentice, but the kind of love a mother has for her kit. Cloudpaw was only six moons when they had been taken from their home, so she hadn't grown

time to really train him, and ever since arriving at the point, his training was taken over by other combatants. She never questioned what went on. She wasn't as brave as everyone thought she was.

He clung to her in a way she abhorred at first, but grew to not enjoy, but tolerate. She was responsible for him now, and that had jumpstarted something weirdly maternal. It was an odd feeling, one she never thought she'd feel. Fawnfreckle was sure she never wanted to have kits; she dedicated her life to her clan and what she could provide it with, and in her excelling strength, it was combat. She always imagined herself adorning the 'star suffix one day. No kits and *definitely* no mate, which the cats of SummerClan respected. Despite her peers, she never really fell into romantic attraction. She used to think she'd grow out of it, but never really did. But here she was, holding some kind of parental authority over this cat who, at first, she thought didn't need any guidance. But he did. Of course he did.

"I left some food for you on the lookout, make sure you eat. Cressida is out in the garden with Holo, if you want some company while I'm out. I told Irisfrost to get you there safely, so don't leave without him." She instructed, tail flicking to get his attention away from the creations he was making in the dust.

"Okay."

"Don't do anything stupid." Fawnfreckle warned.

"I should be telling you that." He mocked, flashing her a self-satisfied glare which she only smiled briefly at before dismissing herself, heading for Irisfrost before she officially left.

Her tabby brother was perched on the ledge which jutted outside of the large twoleg-made cavern, bathing in the sunlight.

"Hey, bee-brain. Make sure Cloudpaw eats." She gently teased to announce her arrival. Irisfrost flicked an ear in response as he lifted his head to look at her.

"And make sure you're there if he wants to go play with Holo. I'm trusting you to keep an eye on him."

"What about me?" Irisfrost queried, feigning a fake look of hurt before laughing gently, motioning for his sister to join him on the ledge. She happily obliged, leaping onto the extended wall and settling beside him.

"I'm sorry, you're right. He'll end up taking care of you." She mused, nudging his shoulder as the two fell into a short but comfortable silence. She stared out towards the mountains in the faint horizon, past all the towering twoleg homes, the hills coated a deep blue. They looked like waves against the light blue of the sky.

"What do these," Irisfrost paused momentarily to find the right word, "*gatherings* usually look like?"

"Why? You jealous?" She hummed, smiling snuggly as he rolled his eyes, nudging her this time.

"Get over yourself."

They both fell into a shared laugh until she answered. "Nothing interesting, honestly. The cats there are usually in the council or were born from prestigious bloodlines. All they do is gossip about everyone, or talk down upon the indigent. It's all tedious and ridiculous and stupid and-"

"Okay, I get it." Irisfrost murmured, breaking her away from her tangent. He had always been the one to calm her down, ever since they were kits. While she was all impulse-fueled and wildfire-like, Irisfrost was gentle-natured and a true mediator.

She was always told she was good luck, but she didn't think so. Whenever she got too out of line, he was always there to ground her. He was her good luck, she supposed. But that sounded sappy and mellow and she wasn't sappy or mellow.

"I'm gonna head out, I guess." She sighed, offering him a warm look. "Stay out of trouble."

"I should be telling you that." He responded, making her laugh softly. *He needs to stop hanging around Cloudpaw*, she thought, *or the other way around.*

Fawnfreckle jumped down from the ledge, entering the clear walls which opened up into the garden as she paused slowly to watch Cloudpaw who still drew lazily in the dust.

She then headed down the winding stairwell, careful to not misplace a paw. She was slightly startled to find a scrawny passerby trying to find anything left in a rat carcass, her face dropping slightly. She was lucky, in a way. Since Cove had grown a liking to her and her friends, they didn't have to worry about food, and now that she was renounced as apart of the prestigious, she didn't have to rely on Cove anymore. She could get it herself.

The light brown mackerel tabby continued her walk once she was in The Quarter, falling into thought. She had been so confused with making sure Cloudpaw's needs were met and attending these *gatherings* that she never had the time to let herself process what happened to Lily and Sage. She was mad it happened. Wouldn't anyone be? No, apparently not. That became evident when cats from the point would complain of their stench, or would shove their decomposing bodies because it was an inconvenience to them, or the fact that no one even cared to properly lay the bodies to rest. When she and Ravendusk tried to, they were stopped and scolded.

She was mad. She was always mad. She was mad because of their death. She was mad because she knew it pushed Ravendusk back. She was mad because Cloudpaw had been tortured. She was mad because her brother was condemned for losing a fight he wasn't prepared for. She was mad because Frostfall was insufferable. She was mad because those kits were stolen. She was mad that she had to kill a cat from the point because he was tormenting a borderline kit and had to fear for her life because of it. And she was mad because her circumstances definitely allowed it.

Mainly, she was mad at herself, and she was mad that Frostfall wasn't wrong about one thing. It was *her* idea to check that stupid twoleg monster, which in hindsight, wasn't even worth it.

She missed her parents. She missed her little siblings, who'd be apprentices soon. She was missing out on *everything*. And it was her fault.

Fawnfreckle cautiously entered the den nestled in the hundreds of others in the point, where wilting material fell from the walls and smeared, dry blood coated the weird turf under her paws as she met up with the others who were too deep in conversation to notice her arrival.

"It could possibly be Crow. We all know he's the weakest link out of those two." Poison, a smoky black tomcat, spoke up. "What use could he be to Ares once Glade moves up?"

"If Ares was gonna choose one of his kits, it'd be Holo. She is completely worthless." Another one spoke, one unfamiliar to Fawnfreckle. She remained quiet, trying to understand what the conversation was about.

"God, Circe would lose her mind. He'd never do that." Amaryllis groaned, her lithe body stretching out as she rolled onto her back. She tilted her head back to keep eye contact with the assembled cats.

"You really think Ares gives a rat's tail what Circe wants? Honestly, her reaction might be the hysterical entertainment he'd want. Breed fear, everyone falls in line. Not even the king's mate is excluded. He'd gladly revel in that message." Foxglove, the head combatant who had forced them to the initiation, spoke.

"You don't think Ares would put Circe *and* Holo in there together?" Amaryllis asked, rolling back onto her stomach as she gazed curiously at the others. *What in StarClan's name were they talking about?*

"No." Foxglove answered quickly, taking a bite out of his fish before continuing. "Holo would never follow through, and neither would Circe. Hyacinth would take them both out, and he can't have that. Whoever is picked, it will be a deliberate choice to make sure Hyacinth ends up dead, and my guess would be Zephyr. Makes room for Glade to fit perfectly into the head combatant rank if it fails."

"Where is Zephyr, anyways? He hasn't shown up in awhile." Another unfamiliar cat queried.

"Ever since Fawnfreckle handed him his tail, he hasn't shown up. Guess his ego was hurt." Amaryllis spoke flatly, her green eyes settling within Fawn's yellow stare. "Speak of the devil. When'd you get here?"

"Just now." Fawnfreckle answered, pushing away her discomfort and forcing her confident persona. "Didn't want to interrupt."

"Hey Fawn," Poison spoke a little too wryly for her liking, "If it came down to it, you think you'd win again?"

"Without a doubt." A lie, but she wasn't gonna allow them to know that. Truth be told, she didn't know if she'd be able to beat Zephyr again, but she didn't want them to think she was just some one hit wonder.

"Maybe we'll test that someday." Poison answered, that same wry expression tainting his smoky-sable face, yellow burning into yellow.

"I'd be thrilled."

"Arrogant little thing." Amaryllis purred, gray-dappled tail flicking as she spoke. Fawnfreckle still wasn't particularly fond of the she-cat for being the reason for her brother's condemnation, even if she was just following orders, but out of the cats that attended these intolerable gatherings, she had found some kind of friendship— or alliance, really— with her.

Though the conversation had began to ebb away into shallow and aimless gossip and the warrior wasn't particularly interested. She was much more intrigued about the conversation that took place during her arrival, and she wasn't one to let curiosity flitter away.

"What were you all talking about before I got here?" Fawnfreckle questioned, not allowing herself to sound too interested as she feigned a yawn.

"The sacrifice." Foxglove answered, flatly, despite the weight those words seemed to hold.

"Come again?" The tabby asked.

"You don't know?" Amaryllis questioned, genuine surprise mixed into her voice. "I thought Cove would've mentioned it."

"Well, she didn't."

"Temper." Poison warned, his slanted yellow eyes looking at her far too threateningly. "You're still new here, clan cat."

"Always so provocative." Amaryllis retorted before she looked back to Fawnfreckle. "The sacrifice. It happens every twelve moons; three cats chosen to fight till the death. The last one standing wins."

Fawnfreckle wanted to let her jaw drop, but she composed herself. Just when she thought this place couldn't get worse, she was proved wrong time and time again.

"And you think Ares would put his own kits in there?" Fawnfreckle asked.

"I mean, I wouldn't put it past him." Amaryllis shrugged. "Those chosen aren't random. They're usually cats who serve some kind of purpose— garner him political gain or someone he needs an excuse to discard. The last time, for instance, some recluse was put in because he never came to events. He didn't necessarily do anything wrong, but Ares didn't like that he didn't conform how he saw fit. The other was a rebel accused with treason, and the third was Foxglove. You can take a guess on the winner."

Fawnfreckle shifted her gaze from Amaryllis to Foxglove, tilting her head in a silent question.

"I was from Stone Height, so my place was secured, but I won." Foxglove caught onto her question. "So here I am now; head combatant. The sacrifice is an honor, even if you die." He explained, something unreadable flicking beneath his eyes

"How so?"

"We are rewarded in death for serving the king." Poison answered instead. Fawnfreckle couldn't fake her shock anymore. These cats weren't just out of touch. They were insane. Brainwashed. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

She didn't know how to respond to that statement, so she shifted the conversation slightly. "Who's Hyacinth?"

"Some rebel." Foxglove responded, flicking the remains of his dead fish.

"It's more than that." Amaryllis took over. "She was the head combatant before Foxglove, highly viewed in the point. She started an entire escape plan moons before she was caught and no one," she paused, "*no one* gets as far as she did. So many were involved and no one ever noticed until a maid ratted her out for higher privileges. Everyone who was proven to be apart of it was killed on sight, but there was no way to know of *everyone's* involvement, so some got off free."

"And Hyacinth?"

"Ares wanted to keep her alive as a piece in the sacrifice. To send a message, I suppose." Foxglove responded.

"But," the tabby paused cautiously, "if, like you said, Hyacinth was originally a head combatant, wouldn't that mean she was there for a reason? Like, she's good at fighting, or something?"

"You'd be correct." Foxglove nodded. "Not just gifted in combat, but she was a prodigal strategist."

"Then why wouldn't Ares just kill her then and there? If she's so good, wouldn't there be a good chance she'd win?"

"Hyacinth is being held prisoner. Barely fed. Isolated. She won't be the same cat she was before she was caught. And if, somehow, she was, Ares will ensure someone is chosen who can beat her. Someone like Zephyr. *Maybe even someone like you.*" Amaryllis proposed, sending a shudder down Fawnfreckle's spine at the thought of her being placed in this so-called sacrifice. What if Holo was put in like the others said? Would she have it in her to kill Cove's sister?

If it came down to it, she would.

"Wouldn't that be something." Poison added in the same wry way he

had been speaking earlier and it took *everything* in her to not lung at him and claw his eyes out.

"You think he'd ever put Cove in?" Someone else spoke up, another cat she was unfamiliar with, but their question made her shrink. *Please, StarClan, no.*

"I don't see how that would serve him. She's not Sybil, but she plays along." Foxglove sighed.

"I wish he would." Amaryllis sneered, eyes fixating on her claws. "Let the pampered princess get a taste of what real horror feels like. Always acting so victimized when she hasn't known even a fraction of the way we've suffered."

Fawnfreckle was left speechless again, watching as the other assembled cats fell into an uproar of agreement as they drug Cove's name through the mud. Wouldn't they be afraid that dragging Ares's daughter would be an act of treason? But then again, the king didn't seem like he cared for anyone but himself.

As night began to draw, the others began to leave one by one until it was just her and Amaryllis. She watched the gray-spotted feline warily, praying she'd leave too, but she never did.

"You know, Central Point is going to crash and burn soon enough." She muttered, claw twirling with a single blooming flower which rose from the cracks of the ground. "Ares may think he has it all under control but his own arrogance is gonna blow up in his face. The point is already overpopulated. What does he do? Steal more kits, which is just more worthless mouths to feed in an attempt to goad Stone Height, who would've had no reason to attack if none of it happened *in the first place."*

This night seemed to be a complete turn of events over and over, and this was just another reason for it. Fawnfreckle stared, dumbfounded, at the gray she-cat. She just assumed they were all Central Point extremists, but maybe they weren't all as brainwashed as she thought.

"You know why Ares turns a blind eye to the division between his

own ranks?" Amaryllis questioned, eyes looking thoughtfully.

"So they remain afraid? Easier to control?" Fawnfreckle answered, feeling like an apprentice again.

"Because it creates divide." Amaryllis corrected. "No one can unite and rebel if they all hate each other. Cats born under renowned and prestigious bloodlines never have to worry about being fed. About being respected. The others aren't so fortunate, and their numbers triple."

"I," Fawnfreckle paused, "I never thought about that."

"I was born to some nobody and I was faulted for that all my life, until I made a name for myself." Amaryllis spoke with distaste. "I know what it's like."

The tabby went quiet, eyes glued to the small feline in front of her who's green eyes stared off into nothing.

She wondered about what Amaryllis had said earlier with the rebels. How some of them were never caught.

She then wondered if Amaryllis had been one.

# chapter 13

[image] [image] [image]

Sunlight streamed through the clear walls surrounding the garden, dancing on the new-leaf buds as they rose between artificial twoleg ground woven around the natural dirt. Ravendusk could see his sable fur shine as the light colored small dapples around his back, offering him a comfortable warmth.

Cloudpaw and Holo were running around, prancing and pouncing and laughing and he watched contently, briefly reminiscing on when he was younger. The others were deep in conversation which he would listen loosely to, drifting in and out but remaining quiet until his attention was sparked.

"I heard something last night." Fawnfreckle said, speaking for the first time after sitting in her own silence. It was unlike her to be so meek and quiet, but he had duly noted it. The point was changing them all.

They others fell into a collective silence, eyeing the tabby who just looked at her paws.

"Something about a sacrifice." She specified, whispered, eyes immediately looking up to stare at Cove. The calico and Cressida both froze uncomfortably, sharing a knowing look before the others began asking questions.

"Sacrifice? As in, an offering kind of thing or actual slaughter? Because I'm praying it's not the latter." Irisfrost nervously asked, eyes burning on his sister who remained quiet.

"What?" Ravendusk asked.

"It's a ceremony that happens every twelve moons." Cressida, to his shock, answered instead. "The *truest form* of showing allegiance, as Ares puts it. Three cats are chosen and forced to fight until one remains."

"Poison mentioned something about being rewarded if you do die. That it's an honor." Fawnfreckle added slowly. It took everything in Ravendusk not to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

"That's insane." He spoke, disdain coating his voice, not expecting the small laugh to get caught on his strained words but he failed to conceal it.

"They mentioned something about a former rebel who was being placed in solitude until it began." Fawnfreckle continued.

"Hyacinth." Cove breathed out.

"Yeah." Fawnfreckle sighed.

"Rebel?" Ravendusk queried, a small surge of curiosity pushing forward. It was soothing, in an odd way, to know others were rebelling. Not everyone was compliant.

"She was the head combatant before Foxglove took her spot. She started a secret uprising that nearly succeeded, but she got caught. Everyone involved was slaughtered on sight and she was left to suffer in isolation, waiting for the inevitable fate of her death in the sacrifice. Ares thought immediate death was too gentle of a punishment." Cove further explained.

"How'd she get caught?" Frostfall asked.

"This was moons ago when prey was scarce; everyone was starving. Some maid had found out and told Ares for food and higher privileges." Cove answered. "Can't blame them. It was a desperate time."

*I can,* Ravendusk thought bitterly.

"Amaryllis said that others apart of the rebellion were never caught. Maybe," Fawnfreckle paused cautiously, "*maybe* there's a chance we could do it too, just be more careful with who we trust."

"Hyacinth is one of the smartest cats I've ever known," Cove started, "if she failed to escape, you don't stand a chance."

"I find that insulting." Ravendusk retorted, resulting in an annoyed huff from his mate.

"Is there a way we could talk to her?" Irisfrost queried hopefully before Frostfall could say anything snarky.

"No chance. She's heavily guarded." Holo piped in from where she sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Cloudpaw. "Besides, I heard a rumor that she's completely lost it. Guess isolated starvation does that to someone."

"Holo." Cove warned.

"But it was just a rumor!" The little brown she-cat exclaimed. "Cats talk just to hear themselves talk 'round here."

"I never would've thought so many could have no sense of personal thought." Frostfall muttered. "They're all so easily influenced."

"If they're so easily swayed, why don't we manipulate them into following us?" Fawnfreckle suggested.

Cove gave her a near-disgusted look. "What a patronizing thing to say."

"I mean, not really." Irisfrost shrugged. "We'd be manipulating them in a good way."

"How do you manipulate someone in a *good way*?" Ravendusk asked skeptically.

"Because it leads to a good cause." Fawnfreckle defended.

"So the end justifies the means, is what you're saying?" Cove asked. "I'm sure everyone who turned out like Ares said the exact same thing."

"Those don't even come close to correlating." Frostfall snapped, tail lashing slowly. "Don't make this into something it's not."

"Then enlighten me." Ravendusk retaliated, meeting his mate's feverish gaze. She was looking at him like he had killed her entire

family.

"I mean," Cloudpaw spoke up, looking at Holo momentarily before letting his eyes fall back on the others, "if we can get out of here, then the means *are* justified. Besides, it's not manipulation, just insight. Get them to think on another course for once."

"I'm just tired of talking about it." Fawnfreckle groaned as she curled onto her back. "I want to do something. I need to."

At that, they all murmured agreement. Whether it was to go anywhere, Ravendusk wasn't sure. It was nice to dream, but dreaming could hurt more in the long run. Holding off on hope felt far more guarded then clinging to a sliver and having your heart shattered time and time again.

He thought about what Cloudpaw had said, and though he thought the words wise of such a youthful cat, he wasn't sure they held up.

These cats were born and raised in Central Point, being indoctrinated with these ideals since their earliest memories and having it deepened for many, many moons.

That kind of conditioning was solidified. Unbreakable.

~~~

Ravendusk couldn't tell if he was dreaming or not when he felt something nudging his cheek, mumbling inaudible curses until he felt someone ram harshly onto his side, jolting him up quickly as he focused his eyes on two tabby-patterned felines.

"What in StarClan's name was that about?" He whisper-screamed, ears pinned in frustration as Irisfrost laughed quietly.

"I have an idea." Fawnfreckle declared, but she didn't share her brother's amusement. Her eyes were wicked with excitement, the same way they'd glisten whenever she'd rush into battle or to a spar or whatever other dangerous situation she had found herself in.

"You don't say." The sable tomcat grumbled, not in the mood to give in to her frantic tendencies.
~~~

"Just hear her out, it's actually not that crazy." Irisfrost pleaded, so Ravendusk remained quiet and listened. But he made sure to have an angry expression. He didn't appreciate being woken up and he wanted to make that clear. Fawnfreckle didn't seem to care, nor her tabby counterpart.

"I was with Amaryllis, the little gray one from the initiation—" Fawnfreckle was cut off by Irisfrost who only muttered how she *wasn't that little* before he let her continue, "she mentioned that Ares was getting careless with the prisoned rebel— Hyacinth— mumbling on about how ignorant he was to the threat of her existence. Left her with only two guards. *Two!"* She exclaimed as quietly as she could. "If we want to even *dream* of going home, she's the cat we need to talk to."

Ravendusk didn't even attempt to stifle a laugh. "Not that crazy, hm?" He retorted, glancing at Irisfrost who gave an embarrassed dip of his head.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure no harm comes our way." Fawnfreckle added sheepishly.

"I'm fully capable of doing that on my own." Ravendusk assured, but he warmed up a bit. "But your dated chivalry is as touching as it is juvenile."

Fawnfreckle wasn't amused by his light teasing. "Nothing more sour than a late blooming comic." She retaliated before lowering her voice once more. "Are you in or not?"

"I am feeling very pressured right now."

"Say yes." Irisfrost prompted. "Say yes. Say yes. Say yes."

"Fine. But I want to be the first to say that this may, remarkably, be the single most foolish idea you've ever come up with." *And I'm just as foolish to tag along,* he thought to himself. But he justified his stupidity with the notion that he would be the one to keep her in check on this endeavor.

"Told you he'd give in! You owe me a mouse." Irisfrost purred,

nudging his sister who only swatted him away.

Before they left, Ravendusk let his eyes wander over the others who slept soundlessly. Cove was sunk on her elevated nest, curled into Cressida as the two appeared to blend together in a ball of white, golden brown and cream-gray fur. Frostfall was splayed out by the outlook which hovered over the blinding city; she had mentioned having liked the view of home. Cloudpaw was at the foot of Cove's nest, his lithe body twisting. He must be dreaming. Ravendusk hoped it was good.

He turned away from them and nodded slowly to the siblings and the three deftly left, but once the excitement of this particular quest began to settle, he could feel his anxieties begin to creep up again. He was beginning to truly understand just how dangerous this was.

*This is so stupid. This is so stupid. This is so stupid. I'm going to kill them both.* Ravendusk was regretting his decision with every step he took as he followed the tabby pair. Last time he let Fawnfreckle take him somewhere, it didn't end well, given their current circumstances.

He tried to act calm as they passed other cats from the point, but he was never too good at pretending. If he looked how he felt, he could only assume it appeared to be like he had a stick up his rump. *This is so stupid,* he thought for extra measure before wishing the siblings could read his mind. *This is so stupid, Fawn! Cough if you hear my thoughts.* Now he *really* felt stupid.

"What are we going to do about the guards?" Irisfrost asked, leaning into his sister and friend so only their ears could hear the question.

"You hadn't already thought about that?" Ravendusk hissed.

"It was a last minute decision!" She shrieked, ears pining as she realized how loud she was. "We'll figure it out, don't worry."

"Don't worry? Don't worry! Oh *don't worry,* I'm completely *not worried."* Ravendusk sneered.

"Oh calm down." She sneered in turn.

"I am *completely* calm."

"You don't really seem calm." Irisfrost replied cautiously.

Ravendusk went quiet and stared at Iris until he dropped his head and sighed. "I was being sarcastic."

"Oh."

Fawnfreckle started leading them through a dark, narrow hall, her eyes wandering around cautiously. Eventually the trio could make out inaudible voices in the distance and they froze. Their eyes danced amongst each other, frightened and excited all the same.

"Okay what now?" Irisfrost whispered, his words jumbling together.

"Just— let me think."

"Are you capable of that?" Ravendusk muttered.

"You didn't have to come." Fawnfreckle retorted, sighing slowly before she walked a few steps forward, peeking past a wall before jerking her head back abruptly. "I see them."

"Did you see Hyacinth?" Her brother asked.

"No, just the guards. They're guarding a tunnel. Could only guess she's in there."

"There no way we're getting past them. It's late anyways." Ravendusk shrugged, turning tail and beginning the walk back before he felt teeth gripping his scruff. "Hey!"

"We are finishing what we started." Fawnfreckle mumbled beneath his fur, letting him go as the two fell into a silent argument with just their eyes while Irisfrost stood awkwardly to the side.

Ravendusk felt a small urge to attack her for being so incredibly stupid, but something else caught his attention. Past her shoulder was an array of old bones, and his mind began to work against his better judgement.

Ravendusk pushed past her, ignoring her hiss as he nosed the bones, growing irked that he was about to do what he was about to do.

The sable feline grabbed a bone in his jaws and peeked past the wall hiding them, pleased to see the guards appeared too occupied in conversation. He swallowed his fear, reminded himself a final time how stupid this was and tossed the bone to the other side. It rattled as it hit the ground and echoed on the cold, dark walls. He felt Irisfrost press against him, then Fawnfreckle, as the trio watched the guards shuffle around and share confused glances before they got up and investigated the sound.

Maybe the guards were the stupid ones all along. Or maybe it was Fawn's luck. He wasn't sure.

"What do we do?" Irisfrost panted.

"Go!" Fawnfreckle exclaimed, pushing past them as Irisfrost messily followed after her, tripping over his paws in the process which only made Raven roll his eyes.

Eventually they made it to the tunnel and pushed past each other, hissing and throwing all of SummerClan's possible insults in the process until the opening they entered through was no longer visible.

"See, that wasn't so bad." Fawnfreckle panted after the trio's tackle of insults.

"Really? How are we going to leave then, oh-so-intelligent one?" Ravendusk retaliated, hissing as she purposely halted abruptly so he'd run into her.

"You're both acting like kits! Let's do what we came to do, okay?" Irisfrost countered, not even trying to hide the annoyance in his voice.

"Hear that, Rave? Stop acting like a kit."

"He was talking to you, too!"

Eventually they fell quiet with only the sound of gentle pattering paws, and Ravendusk was starting to believe the back and fourth bickering was better than the dreadful silence.

"What if she's actually lost it?" Irisfrost murmured.

"What are you talking about?" His sister asked.

"Holo said she lost it."

"That was a rumor, remember?" Ravendusk reminded.

"Yeah but-"

"Stop stressing." Fawnfreckle sighed. "Too late to turn back anyways."

"And who's fault is that?" Ravendusk sneered.

"I think the *both of you* have lost it. I'm sure you'll fit right in with Hyacinth." Irisfrost muttered.

"Shut up." Ravendusk and Fawnfreckle snapped in unison before meeting each other's gazes, only growing further annoyed by each other and now Iris. Their staring contest was broken by the sound of distant coughing, and the trio all exhaled shakily.

"Who's going first?" Ravendusk asked.

"You." Fawnfreckle answered stoically.

"Fawn, I swear I'm about to shove your tail down your thro—"

"StarClan I was kidding." She interrupted. "I'll go first, *scaredy cat*."

Ravendusk swallowed the retort he was going to follow up with and sighed in defeat. He was over it, so he let her have the last word as he and Irisfrost followed her through the tunnel which began to expand.

Eventually they made it and suddenly no one knew what to do. Ravendusk held his breath as his eyes slowly wandered to the matted tortoiseshell form huddled up in the corner, ribs poking out with each ragged breath. The sable tomcat looked at his two friends, finally realizing their dire situation.

"Hello." Irisfrost, the most diplomatic of the three, whispered ever-so-softly and the three froze as Hyacinth's ear flicked and they were met with blazing green eyes. The multicolored feline seemed slightly dazed at first as she scrambled to her scrawny legs, head tilting ever so slightly.

"These are new faces." She coughed weakly, her voice thin. No one answered, which she appeared to find amusing. "Does my reputation still precede me? I can assure you all, I'm not what I used to be. You can relax, you're making me nervous."

"No, it's not that." Ravendusk spoke carefully. "You're Hyacinth, right?"

"Who's asking?"

"I'm Ravendusk. These are my friends, Fawnfreckle and Irisfrost."

She chuckled. "Was your mother on catmint when she named you?"

"We aren't from here." Irisfrost answered, tail flicking. "We're from far away."

"Then how you'd end up here?"

"Long story." Fawnfreckle quickly responded, eyes narrowing on the tortoiseshell. "We heard about your predicament. About the rebellion."

"Was hardly a rebellion." Hyacinth corrected, stretching her back as she yawned, revealing sharp teeth in the process. "More of an escape plan. I wanted out, nothing more. I couldn't care less about overtaking this hellhole."

"Had you not been caught, you think it could've worked?" Ravendusk queried, watching as her green eyes snapped to meet his own.

"A lot of things needed to go right. Maybe. Maybe not." She nonchalantly answered. "How did you even get in here?"

"Wasn't too hard. There's only two guards out, we were able to

distract them." Irisfrost explained and the tortoiseshell chuckled again.

"I was wondering who was crazy enough to come find me, or if it was due to the king's growing negligence. I suppose the latter. Ares always gets lazy." She rasped, curling her wispy tail around her paws. "Why are you all here?"

"We want to go home." Fawnfreckle whispered.

"I'm afraid there's not much I can do to help you." Hyacinth sighed after another spasm of coughs.

"How'd you do it? How'd you get others on your side?" Fawnfreckle seemed to disregard the brindled feline's last words.

"My biggest mistake was ever involving anyone outside of my own circle. Everyone in the point wants to save their own skin. Can't trust a single one of 'em."

"So you're saying?" Irisfrost prompted, voice fading out.

"She's saying we're screwed." Ravendusk sighed, wanting nothing more than to go back to sleep. This was useless.

"I really do want to help." Hyacinth whispered faintly. "But I've learned my lesson. You lot could end up killed, or worse." She explained, looking around to silently explain that worse was the current situation she was in.

"You said your biggest mistake was involving others from outside your circle. You think it'd be possible to leave with the group we already have?" Fawnfreckle continued to ask, not willing to back down.

Hyacinth remained quiet for a moment, contemplating the question. "Guards flood every sector of the point, and not just that, but the city too. They're everywhere. Ares has unnamed spies, too. Their sole purpose is to find those who try to deflect."

Ravendusk's heart dropped. It really was hopeless.

"And if somehow you miraculously did escape, the city extends for days worth of walking. You'd have to cross dozens of constantly swarmed roads, feral dogs, feral locals of the city, and that only touches the surface. If the risk is worth it to you, go for it. But the odds are indefinitely against you."

Silence followed them again and the trio just stared at each other, looks of defeat evident on each of their faces.

"I am sorry." Hyacinth concluded, her voice more gentle and sincere.

"Thank you, anyways." Ravendusk dipped his head, though alarm began to prickle at his pelt as approaching steps could be heard in the distance. *StarClan, help us.*

He twisted around to see the two guards they had distracted and Sybil, an all-too complacent glint shining in her terrifying blue eyes.

"Isn't this a sight for sore eyes." The tall she-cat spoke, breaking the terror-filled silence. "Ares wants to see you all."

。゚•□ɔ♡ɐ□•゚。

iris, fawn & raven, probably:

# chapter 14

Ravendusk wanted to be mad. Oh, how bad he wished he could *just* be mad. But he wasn't mad. There was no room for anger in an already suffocating room of fear. He was drowning in it. Choking. Burning.

He clung close to Irisfrost and Fawnfreckle, the trio circled by Foxglove, Poison and Zephyr, who seemed far too smug. Zephyr especially. The guards who had been watching over Hyacinth were instructed to come as well, along with the prisoner herself.

He looked around hesitantly as Sybil guided them into the garden where the rest of his clanmates remained, along with Cove, Cressida, an unfamiliar cat and alas, Ares. He held himself with a tipped chin and unreadable yet frosty stare. It was unnerving. Ravendusk would've preferred if he looked angry. The king's stoic gaze was far more chilling.

"As you requested, these treasonous—" Poison was ignored as Ares pushed past him. The scarred king was quiet for an uncomfortably long time before his eyes fell to the two guards who had been watching Hyacinth.

"Explain yourselves."

"We heard a noise. We didn't go far, I swear to you. We thought it might be an intruder." One of them reasoned, his voice devoid of any confidence.

"This was a situation that required the both of you?" Ares questioned complacently, head tipping ever so slightly. "And was there an intruder?"

"No." The other replied, his voice defeated as he dropped his head.

"Yes, there was." Ares corrected, his voice sounding far too gentle; poignant, almost. The comforting edge of his voice dropped

viciously, however. "While you two *fools* were chasing rattling wind, three cats were able to slip right past you. I have given you both a simple task, one even the densest trainee could complete. What ever does that say about the two of you? How incompetent can one be, let alone two?"

"We are very sorry. It won't happen again, I swear it to you." One of the guards assured.

"I know it won't." Ares agreed, whispered, keeping his eye contact with the guards for a fleeting moment. He redirected his gaze towards Sybil and Poison, faintly dipping his head as a silent command. One slight movement held so much power. *Too much power.*

The slow descent of dread that crossed the guards' faces forced Ravendusk's blood to run cold as Sybil and Poison approached the two and slit their throats before he could even remember to breathe. Both bodies dropped at a mere blink.

"Now that won't do." Ares shook his head slowly, staring at the now deceased guards. "What a shame. Hyacinth, even while rotting away you are still quite the trouble."

"I couldn't leave you too bored." The tortoiseshell remarked, eliciting the slightest chuckle from the king.

"Now, you three. I am assuming you have a good explanation for this? If so, please enlighten me. I must say I am very curious." Ares promoted, a chilling look remaining on his face. Ravendusk wanted to answer him, but the words were stuck in his throat. Did it even matter? Those guards were not shown even a sliver of mercy, and now they were dead, and it was once again his fault. *Selfish. Stupid. This is your fault. It always is.*

"We couldn't sleep," Irisfrost quickly said, "so, so we went for a walk. Wanted something- something new to see. We saw the tunnel, and, and no one was there. We had *no* idea where it lead to. We were just curious."

"Hm." Ares hummed as he redirected his gaze to Hyacinth. "What

did they want? What did you tell them?"

"They found me, completely by accident. Your security isn't so secure, Ares. I am a little offended. Do you think I'm too easy to handle now?" Hyacinth questioned, but he wasn't amused anymore.

"What did you tell them?"

"I told them the truth. I am a lot of things, but I am no liar." She answered. "I told them how I arranged an entire escape right under your nose, and you were close. *Very close.* While I was strategizing all those war crimes for you. While I was leading the battles that were victorious for *your* cause. While I delivered Stone Height's queen to you, barely breathing. A token of my *devout* loyalty." She paused at that, eyes shining challengingly at the irony that coated her final sentence. Irony they both saw through. "I was also plotting against your very demise."

"A demise that held no merit. Your loyalists were slain and now you rot away, counting down the days you too will meet their fate. Is this another conspiracy? Consequences will follow and you are already in such a fragile state. I'd tread lightly." He warned, feigning a tone that seemed to genuinely care for her well-being. Ravendusk was quickly realizing just how well the king could control even the most subtle pitch of his voice and expression of face.

"Not like you can kill me yet, so what do I have to lose?" Hyacinth retaliated, and before Ravendusk had the time to keep up, the king was slashing the prisoner across the face with enough force to knock her off-paw.

"If I hear that any of you even come close to her direction, you will be slaughtered on sight, and that is a promise." Ares threatened, pushing his face uncomfortably close to Raven's.

"Understood." The sable feline answered sharply despite the drumming heart beneath his chest.

"Circe." Ares demanded, and almost immediately the unfamiliar brown she-cat was by his side, her green eyes locking with his. "Order the maids to discard of the bodies. I will not have their

stench sour my garden." *Sour his garden.* Ravendusk scoffed quietly. *Since when has he given a rat's tail for the garden?*

"Of course." She dipped her head, keeping eye contact for an oddly long time before disappearing.

"Sybil, assign new guards for the prisoner. Make sure she's secured."

"Yes father." Sybil mewed, leaving with the other point cats until only Ares remained.

"I am a cat of my word, Ravendusk. Remember that." *Remember that.* Ravendusk didn't have to worry about that, his mind was never kind enough to let him take any threat loosely. As they were left alone in the garden, a sense of dread devoured them, spiraling a pit into their stomachs. The ebony tomcat swallowed the food that was making its way up, green eyes snapping towards Frostfall as something took over his mate and she sauntered towards Fawnfreckle and Irisfrost once they were truly alone.

"Who's idea was it?" Each word was just as venomous as the next, her teeth bared and crystalline eyes slitted. Frostfall didn't move. Didn't blink. She kept her accusing stare on the pair of siblings. "I'm not stupid, only the two of you would be foolish enough to do this and drag Raven into it. *Who was it?"*

They remained silent until Frostfall narrowed her eyes on the tabby sister. "It was you, wasn't it Fawn? Putting everyone in danger, *again.* You can't help yourself, can you? We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you. Cloudpaw wouldn't have nearly died if it wasn't for you and again, *again,* you put everyone in jeopardy. Was it worth it? Did you get the thrill? Have you found out which way you will get us all killed next? No really! I am *very* interested to know."

"I only did what you weren't brave enough to do." Fawnfreckle replied, her face stone cold as Irisfrost looked at his paws hopelessly.

"You think I'm not brave because I did not involve myself and others on a suicide mission? That's not bravery, Fawnfreckle. It's stupidity."

"Frostfall, please." Irisfrost murmured quietly.

"You need to stop enabling her!" Frostfall snapped, shaking her head. "One day her luck is going to run out and I will not allow it to drag me down with her."

"It won't come to that." Ravendusk soothed, placing his tail on his mate's shoulder.

"You don't know that."

~~~

"I'm sure you father is glad we came along." Ravendusk broke the silence to let Cove know of his presence as she watched from the lookout, turning her head to meet his eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Keep him on the tip of paws." He followed, although he was beginning to understand that she was quite bemused. "Deprive him of any boredom."

"Right." She breathed, redirecting her gaze to the city lights. "I'm sure he was thrilled."

A small silence settled as Ravendusk approached her, pausing cautiously as he followed her eyes to the city towering beneath them. "Can I sit?"

"Yeah."

The sable feline sat beside her, watching her momentarily but unsure of what to say, so he let her take the lead, if she wanted.

He didn't think she'd speak at first. And she didn't, not for awhile. She was in a static state, one she seemed to enter a lot. He wondered what was going on inside her mind. If it was as chaotic as he imagined it to be. Or if it was still, as still as she appeared physically.

"Athela's rage runs through us all." She whispered, causing a
~~~

confused look to cross his features as he tilted his head. "The gods have no mercy because *she* won't allow it."

"What?" He asked, deadpanned really. He didn't mean to sound so blunt, but he couldn't help it sometimes.

"Athela and Xercaxes." She answered, *like that confirmed anything,* Raven thought. "Two of the most heedless, obstinate figures in our history."

"I don't mean to sound dense, but I don't follow." Ravendusk muttered and Cove had the nerve to eye him like *he* was stupid. Reluctantly, she explained onward.

"Generations ago, there was no Central Point. No Stone Height. Just Dawning Tower."

Ravendusk stared, ear flicking. "They used to be united?"

"Once upon a time." She sighed. "I suppose democracy was always meant to be fleeting."

"What happened?"

He could see the city lights reflecting in her eyes clearly, but he looked away. He didn't want to feel like he was rushing her for an answer.

"Athela managed political means with other factions of the city. Intelligent, cunning, clever— only the most trustful historians will define her as such. Our own pure-blood teachers refer to her as halfwitted and impulsive, but we'll never know. Our history is tainted by biased tellers." Cove explained. "And Xercaxes ruled the combatants and dealt with war commands and strategy. *Xercaxes, The Barbaric King*, he was called."

"Barbaric?"

"Yes." Cove confirmed. "He presents my own father's ways as saintly; mere child's play."

"And they ruled together?" Ravendusk queried.

"Voted into to, though it's commonly believed to have been rigged as their father was known to be ambitious. How convenient that both his offspring are chosen to rule?" She spoke, asking like she wanted her conspiracy to be validated, before she continued on. "But to their core, they are siblings. And you know how siblings are." She sighed. "Competitive to a fault. Animosity rose fast and they clashed often, sometimes quite violently. Ideals changed, and they didn't align. Split power scheming. Civil war."

Ravendusk was quiet for a moment. He had lived through his own civil war moons ago, fought between the four clans of his homeland. Un unnecessary horror, it seemed, once again.

"What happened?"

"The divide widened rapidly and we're taught that every member of Dawning Tower knew it would end in tooth and claw before the siblings did themselves. Both Athela and Xercaxes wanted complete rulership and declared the other exiled, but by that point of having their own factions split, calls for exile turned into calls for execution which bled away into carnage and destruction."

"Didn't seem like war was their intention." Ravendusk spoke.

"Maybe it wasn't their intention, but it was their fault." Cove countered. "They were too consumed in one-upping each other, they failed to notice the growing hostility of their own members who ended up fighting a war they could've prevented."

"Who won?" Raven asked.

"Neither." The calico answered, shockingly. "Hundreds of moons before Dawning Tower was conceived, these old religious zealots ruled the city. War is blasphemous to them, and they had our numbers in tenfold. They put a hard stop on the war and conducted a peace settlement and both factions had no choice but to agree."

"If these *old religious zealots*— as you call them— were against war, what was stopping Athela or Xercaxes from wiping them out?"

"Let me rephrase; they were against war that they deemed vain or

futile. To them, they were maintaining peace, and only for a 'pure' outcome, was violence not prohibited." Cove answered, mockery lacing her voice.

"So you're saying they would've wiped out your ancestors?" Ravendusk asked.

"In retrospect, they probably should have. Would've saved everyone a lot of suffering." She said thoughtfully. "They were called The Council, and they were as pious as you can imagine. It was ordered that Xercaxes and his faction would remain at Dawning Tower, which was later renamed to be Central Point. As for Athela and her faction, she was given a new territory towards the outskirts of the city that was closer to where the council cats populated."

"Stone Height." Ravendusk finished, and she nodded.

"I guess blood isn't thicker than water." He added.

"It definitely isn't." She snapped coolly, but he didn't think her outburst was directed towards him. "Power, with even good intentions, is corrupt in an absolute system."

"You really think that?"

"I know it." She answered quickly, meeting his gaze for the first time. "It's why I would rather take my own life than become heir. With absolute power, you have the choice between good and bad, but you will still use that power selfishly because you were given it, and because you can."

"I disagree." Ravendusk shrugged.

"How? You wouldn't even understand. You've never seen absolutism until now."

"I don't think power necessarily taints, but more so heightens morals— or lack of— that were already there." Ravendusk explained. "I think cats like Ares and Sybil, who were brought up being told they deserve that type of power, will lead to higher self conceit once they can use it for themselves. Someone being gifted power through chance and not because they sought it is another

story."

"I don't think you realize how dangerous the removal of rules and consequences are to anyone. Having rules is what keeps us grounded. It's what primarily separates right from wrong. You take that away, eventually you forget what the real problems are. You forget the consequences because they don't effect you. Most already have low self control, and complete power gives way to dangerous freedom." Cove countered, her voice sounding lower than usual before she continued.

"If you can do anything you want with no one to stop you, *you* have to be the one to stop you. But what fun is that when you've already reached that point?"

# chapter 15

*And sorrow's native son*
*He will not smile for anyone*
*And pretty girls make graves*

*Frostfall's POV*

˳˚ •□ɔ♡e□•˚ ˳

Since her earliest memories, the ones typically sheltered by youth naivety, all she could remember was being the emotional latch for her siblings. She was born during the brink of a war, which often led to her and her littermates neglected. Emotionally, that is. She never blamed her parents for this— in the beginning. They were good enough. They were her educators, providers and ultimately the ones who gave her life. And they let her and her siblings get away with *everything.* She loved that the most.

At fourteen moons she was orphaned. A double shot. Both dead within mere moments of each other. StarClan, the things she would give to have one last conversation with her parents. She missed them— she thought, at least. She never really processed how that made her feel. Never got the chance to. Ravendusk had lost his sister the same day, and it ruined him. She had to be there for him. She was okay with that. He needed her. It wasn't his fault. She knew that, in the beginning, she really did. But now...

She kept telling herself that it was too long, too much time, an unnecessary amount of time, a *selfish* amount of time.

At eighteen moons her sister gave birth to her niece and nephew, Frozenpaw and Cloudpaw. And at eighteen moons, she became a makeshift-mother in place of her sister who should've never had kits to begin with. Frostfall loved them, and she didn't mind taking care of them while their mother was out doing whatever it was she found more exciting than motherhood.

At twenty-four moons she found herself in her own purgatory called Central Point. Perhaps this was her punishment for the cat she had become, awaiting her inevitable death where she'd be sent to rot after her judgment. That thought kept her up at night.

Now she was twenty-seven moons and yet she still felt like a kit. Processed things like a kit would. Saw things the way a kit would. Reacted the way a kit would. She never could mature in that way. More than anything, she hated how the world offered her the self awareness to have this clarity. *Ignorance is bliss and cats acted like that was a bad thing, but they were wrong. The things I would do to live in undisturbed stupidity.*

The others didn't understand. Not like she did, she was convinced. She could only guess how they viewed her. Uptight. Control freak. Mad. Other words along the lines. Words that fell from Fawnfreckle's jaws bared in shallow gossip the tabby was far too dense to understand in depth. Fawnfreckle wasn't half as clever as she thought she was and Frostfall reveled in her utter annoyance for the striped warrior and her undeserved *luck.*

She eventually grew to blame her parents, partly. They left her in the world to hold everyone's pain upon her own.

She blamed Ravendusk, partly. She just wanted— *needed*— some reciprocity. A slight acknowledgment. *Anything.* He was wounded, okay, but so was everyone else. Why can they handle it? Why can she handle it? Why *can't he?*

She blamed her sister, partly. Oh Rimesong, the selfish little brat. She treated Frozenpaw's blindness as some abomination against herself.

She blamed Fawnfreckle, partly. It was her who had risked their lives for petty means. It was her who cost Cloudpaw of his innocence at only six moons to the brutality of the point. It was her who was too dim witted and irresponsible to even admit her own fault in their predicament. *StarClan, I can't stand her.*

When she was feeling particularly delusional, she blamed *anyone* who even breathed in her direction. And she blamed them for the

full of it. She's just one cat. A bystander, like most were. Why was she so condemned? The universe was unfair. It was against her.

She would go against it tenfold the force if only she had the power to.

But she was just one cat.

She always wanted to be perfect. Perfect mate. Perfect kits. Perfect full time mother— and not because Raven wanted that. *StarClan no*. Perhaps it was homely of her. Ideal. Boring. But she wanted it because *she* wanted it. She wanted to give her kits the life she always dreamed of having when she was little. A way to heal herself in them and tend to them the way she could only dream of. Her perfectly crafted tale.

For once she just wanted someone to take care of her. That wasn't a horrible thing to want, was it? That wasn't selfish? She was *right* to be angry, she was sure of it.

And angry she was.

Frostfall was perched upon the lookout, letting the sunlight warm her fur as her blue eyes wandered over the cascading city below. Her gaze trailed out into the horizon where the mountains settled, faintly. Home. She missed home. She missed Paleflower's *StarClan-awful* singing, as Iris puts it. She missed her reckless, selfish sister. She missed Frozenpaw. She wondered how the little she-cat was fairing without her there.

"*You'll be my eyes for me, won't you Frostfall?"* The little she-cat had asked moons ago.

"Careful, once someone lost footing and fell. Tumbled so far you couldn't even see her body. Not a pretty corpse." A strange yet somehow familiar voice drifted in her ears, one that sounded deliberately pitched. Frostfall let her eyes rest with a piercing azure stare, freezing as her blood ran cold.

"She wasn't too pretty to begin with, I suppose. But I couldn't have you share her same fate." Sybil continued with a concern that Frost

couldn't decipher as genuine or not.

"I have quite good balance, but thank you." She nodded, trying to study the feline before her. Sybil seemed relaxed, long ears pointed and friendly. Narrowed eyes not quite as terrifying as before, until she stared too long. Yet something about her was still quietly chilling. Frostfall couldn't put her claw on it.

"But you are."

"Are you saying that because I look like you?" Frostfall responded, slightly shocked at herself. She sometimes let her tongue speak for her without any consultation with her mind. Lucky for her, Sybil seemed amused by it.

"God, what kind of conceited narcissist do you take me for?" The heir asked with feigned hurt, head tilted in a way that seemed a little too condescending for Frost's liking.

"I know what I've been told." Frostfall shot back, but she was able to shelter her hostility. On all she knew about the king's daughter, Sybil wasn't someone you wanted as an enemy.

"By a biased teller."

Frostfall wasn't sure how to take that. She supposed, in a way, Cove was a biased teller. But Cove didn't actively partake in the suffering of others, either. So it cancelled out in her mind.

"Oh, never mind that." The heir sighed, thin tail flicking as a curious gleam fell upon her slanted stare. "You know, I never could understand how someone *like you* could ever settle with the deadbeats you have entangled yourself with. The one especially, Raven— oh, what's his name? You all have such *fascinating* names."

"Ravendusk."

"Ravendusk! That's right." Sybil mewed, tail flicking painfully slow as her eyes narrowed. "The nerve he has," she paused to gently chuckle, "involving himself with the wrong cats."

"Like who?"

"Hyacinth."

Frostfall froze, forcing her mind to tame her tongue. She had to be very careful with how she proceeded this conversation.

"That was an accident."

"Was it?" The heir quickly challenged, her eyes uncomfortably still. Silence followed. Loud silence until it was broken.

"I understand. They are familiar. Easy. You think you can trust them. Him. But what have they given you? How have they benefited you?"

"They love me. They would do anything for me."

"Love is a fickle thing." Sybil spoke, as if she was advising her. "And dwindling. It's easy to speak, easy to pretend, but fickle nonetheless."

Frostfall remained quiet, eyes frozen on the feline who mirrored her in appearance.

Sybil settled down into a more comfortable position and the SummerClan warrior was beginning to think she wasn't planning on leaving anytime soon.

"You know, a long time ago, only first born toms were appointed heirs." Sybil said, scarcely nonchalant.

"Why?" Frostfall queried. That seemed like such a bizarre custom to have, a concept that was entirely foreign to her.

"Because they are stronger. Faster. Smarter. Surely a she-cat wouldn't fair in comparison, not in their eyes." Sybil explained in that same mocking tone. "How I see it, there is no one more suited to rule than one." She explained. "Toms react in anger. No tact. No grace. They don't have the," she paused, "*psychological* intelligence to rule. Such easy things to control and they're so wrapped up in their proclaimed glory, they don't even realize it. You see Frost, you make them believe that you're an obedient follower. They can't tell the difference between an innocent want and manipulation when

you use pretty words."

"You think the same about Ares?" The SummerClan warrior defied.

"Oh, absolutely not." She claimed. "Ares is an exception." Sybil spoke all silver-tongued and deliberately paused, words so calculated they felt artificial. How Frost saw it, Ares seemed a lot more incompetent than the heir was giving him credit for. Sybil seemed like she'd be smart enough to realize that, but all these cats spoke like they were born with an infinite amount of wisdom. It was just words, though. They all wallowed in 'proclaimed glory' and being a she-cat didn't exempt Sybil. Not in Frostfall's eyes. They were all the same.

"Are you hungry?"

Frostfall broke out of her trance, uncertain at first, but reluctantly gave in. "I could fair for something to eat."

"Rhea, darling, fetch something out of my father's pile. The best, please. Can't leave my pretty friend looking malnourished." The heir spoke, and it was only then that Frostfall noticed the marbled gray she-cat at the entrance of the lookout. An unsure thing, she appeared.

"Of course." She spoke delicately, dipping her head as she disappeared.

"Who is she?" Frostfall queried.

"Maid." Sybil answered, a nerving smile crossing her features. "She does whatever I want, whenever I want it."

"How convenient." Frostfall retorted, but she felt heat spread across her body as she realized her tone. Sybil didn't seem bothered by her hostility, though. *Watch your tongue, Frost.*

"You got quite the tongue on you." She pressed, eyes looking up and down in clear observation of the SummerClan warrior— she didn't even try to hide it. "You remind me of my father's new plaything."

"Should I be offended?" Frostfall retorted, again. With that same

tone, again. *StarClan, watch your tongue!*

*"*Oh, no.*"* Sybil mused, laughing lightly. "Circe worked her way up right where she wanted to be when she involved herself with him. She feigns fear constantly, painting herself as this *perfect little victim*." The heir scorned. "But she's brought him kits that have secured her stability and power."

"Holo?" Frostfall questioned.

"Glade and Crow as well, my father's prized possessions. After me, that is." She added, something complacent shining in her eyes. "Circe's an adaptable thing. Ares thinks she's tenuous, but I can read her more thoroughly. It's laughable really, she's not the pawn he thinks she is. I do hope she doesn't get to deep into her own game, or she'll end up like my mother."

Frostfall was gutted by how casually the heir spoke, many things rushing through her mind far too fast for her to make a single coherent thought. What did she mean by that? *End up like her mother?*

She didn't have much time to dwell on the thought as Sybil continued on as though it was nothing but idle gossip.

"Circe may be smart but no one is crazier than Ares. Anyone who's underestimated that fact," Sybil paused deliberately as her claws sunk into a beetle beneath her, "well, it hits far too fast to notice." Frost flinched slightly, eyes snapping up to meet the soulless eyes of the heir. This seemingly amicable conversation was beginning to feel like some kind of shrewd power play. Or maybe Frostfall was paranoid, something she was often told throughout her life.

"What does this have to do with me?" Again, Frostfall spoke with that same tone. She was beginning to think it was hopeless to filter it. Still, Sybil didn't seem phased. *If only Fawnfreckle or Ravendusk could be as impervious as the heir.*

"She's underestimated. She offers more, and I am saying that as someone who *despises* Circe. I can still appreciate one's virtues if they are artful enough."

"And what virtues do you see in me?"

"I see someone far too comely and far too canny to be left with the cats you seek amity with; cats with no influence, no power, no authority. Cats who go against our very principles." Every word grew quieter and more pronounced, so sharp it could pierce skin. Sybil paused painfully long before she continued, her face uncomfortably close to Frost's. "You seem compassionate. A caretaker. *That* is your weakness. Learn to serve yourself with what you have on your own, and you will succeed in ways far more vibrant. That is the ultimate power."

Everything the warrior had gathered, Sybil was wrapped up in herself, blinded by her own self-regard. It was all becoming obvious what this was. It was damage control. Or more specifically, a way to garner control over a situation. *Your father sent you here to instill fear because of the Hyacinth situation, and yet you boast on your own awareness of the situation and the tedious nature of Ares's use of the cats in his life— pawns, as you had put it.* A pawn that Frostfall believed Sybil to be. She wanted to say it out loud, but she managed to keep that thought silenced. Still, Frostfall was beginning to hate the heir a little less. Sybil seemed far too particular on what and who she divulged in, if anything or anyone at all. Self serve to self succession and all that. That thought was appealing, duly, but still burning. Frostfall didn't like how captivated she was by it's light.

"That's what you do, I'm assuming?" She replied in shared complacency to the heir's previous statement, feeling as though she had better footing in the conversation now that she convinced herself she knew what it was about.

"It's how I was raised." Sybil answered. "And I wouldn't want it any other way. Look where it's gotten me."

"I thought being heir was your first born right." Frost said, though it was more of a slight instead of a question.

Sybil chuckled. "Not always."

"And your father?"

"I don't trust anyone enough to tell them anything when it comes to my father." Sybil replied hastily.

"That tells me everything I need to know." The SummerClan warrior spoke, challenged almost. Perhaps she was getting too comfortable. She tend to get reckless with her words and Fawnfreckle would *never* let her forget it.

But once again, Sybil wasn't phased. In fact, she appeared amused *again. "*As I said, underestimated."

Everything Sybil said just left Frostfall with more questions than answers. Despite being guarded with some of the things she was saying, whenever Frost would pick up on something she thought would be useful or she thought the heir had slipped up with, Sybil never seem troubled by it. Perhaps that was the point. Maybe she just wanted her to believe she was getting something useful out of her, when in reality, it was a dead end. *It's a cat-and-mouse game*, she thought. And she did not want to be the mouse.

The two were interrupted as Rhea returned, two plump rabbits stuffed in her jaws. She dropped it gently, nodding as she did so. They were strange. Looked nothing like the rabbits from the forest.

"Thank you, Rhea." Sybil spoke.

"Thank you." Frost copied.

"Of course." The marbled gray feline spoke, stepping back to give the two privacy.

"You are nothing like your sister."

"A compliment." Sybil said as she took a small bite out of her rabbit. *I'm not so sure,* was all Frostfall could think. And she wasn't even Cove's biggest fan. Far from it.

"You don't think so?" Sybil prompted, a somewhat smug glint in her eyes. Frostfall froze, but the heir picked up on her sudden fear and laughed.

"Cove is an ungrateful, spoiled brat. Born into wealth and power yet

it is still not enough for her." Sybil said. "I don't take mind of those beneath me, but she does. Or she pretends to. That is what irks me. I don't pretend to care for the acclaim of others."

"And she does?"

"Cove likes to run around crying victim and in the same breath take pity upon the indigent. Has she no awareness how ignorant that makes her look? As if her struggles could even compare? Like I said, I don't care for them," Sybil paused as she narrowed her eyes, "but I can still see the fatuity in her."

"Do you care for her at all? Or anyone, for that matter?" It seemed like a stupid question, but Frostfall couldn't help but ask.

"We've only just met and you already want to know my deepest vulnerabilities?"

"I didn't think you had any."

Sybil laughed. "I like you." She deliberately paused again. "But if you want the truth, I will give it to you. I value myself over them. Which is vain, sure. But as I said, self serve and you will succeed. I don't find fault in being selfish, I believe it to be the greatest of strengths."

"Most don't respect selfishness." Frostfall countered.

"A singular flaw that taints our kind, I'm afraid. But I'm not stupid, I know this." Sybil explained. "I know what others can do for me and I'm not against shared respect. Cats will follow you under fear, sure. My father is example to that, and *it is* effective. But for how long? Give it time to settle and cats grow restless of their poor treatment. They grow *hungry for blood*." She made sure to emphasize that final statement.

"I want to be revered." Sybil eventually concluded after a short silence. "And cats like honesty, and I am honest. I believe it's the most honorable thing about me."

。˚ •□ɔ♡e□•˚ 。

Slightly lengthy chapter. Starts off as more of a character study then blends into a whole lot of dialogue. I heavily enjoyed writing this and exploring the dynamic of these two characters as well as Frostfall's internal monologue!

I hope you guys have a great day and if you're reading this when it first came out, hope you all are having a wonderful New Years!